The KHAKI GIRLS BEHIND THE LINES

By

EDNA BROOKS

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SETTING HER TEETH, JOAN DROVE THE AMBULANCE FORWARD.

THE KHAKI GIRLS BEHIND THE LINES

OR

Driving with the Ambulance Corps

By EDNA BROOKS

Author of
"The Khaki Girls of the Motor Corps," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

THE KHAKI GIRLS SERIES

By EDNA BROOKS

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THE KHAKI GIRLS OF THE MOTOR CORPS
or Finding Their Place in the Big War

THE KHAKI GIRLS BEHIND THE LINES
or Driving with the Ambulance Corps

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THE KHAKI GIRLS BEHIND THE LINES

CHAPTER I

READY TO GO ACROSS

"I CAN hardly believe it yet, Val! Please pinch my arm good and hard. Then I'll be sure that I'm not dreaming. I feel all the time as though I'd wake up all of a sudden to find I'd only dreamed that I was going to France."

"You're wide awake, Joan. I'll assure you of that without inflicting needless suffering upon you," laughed Valerie Warde. "We're actually going to France and no mistake about it. What I'd like to know is *when* we're going."

"That's hard to say," sighed Joan. "It might be to-morrow or perhaps not until next week. It might even be two weeks before we sail. It's all very mysterious, isn't it? I suppose if there comes a day when we're refused permission to go into the city we'll know that

the time is near at hand. This waiting is what makes it seem like a dream."

"When we're told to stick tight to the dormitory we'll be fairly certain of sailing on the evening of that same day. I have an idea it'll be at night that we'll sail," surmised Valerie.

Six weeks had elapsed since Joan Mason's memorable talk with her father in the living-room of her own home, during which he had shown himself not merely resigned but patriotically willing to grant Joan the absolute right to go to France as an ambulance driver, provided she was accepted.

At that time Joan's fate had hung in the balance. Still under the age which the United States Government has set for women who make application to join the overseas Ambulance Corps, she had pinned her hopes on gaining the special permission of the President of the United States to embark on the coveted detail.

Though Valerie's case was also dubious for the same reason, the latter lacked but a month of being twenty-three years of age. Whereas Joan was not yet twenty.

Both girls had powerful friends at court to plead for them. They had more than that, however. The records they had made for themselves in the Liberty Motor Corps were such as could not be overlooked.

How Valerie and Joan first met, became friends on sight, and together joined the Liberty

Motor Corps of America has already been set down in "THE KHAKI GIRLS OF THE MOTOR CORPS."

Those readers who have followed the doings of the two Khaki Girls in this story will readily recall the succession of remarkable adventures that fell to the lot of the chums while on duty in the Corps. While Valerie quickly won laurels as an ambulance driver on city duty, Joan soon identified herself as a valuable worker for the Department of Justice.

As a result of a long campaign of Secret Service duty, which centered about an enemy Bund, whose monstrous outrages against the Government had caused great loss of life and property, Joan, aided by Valerie, had been instrumental in bringing the ringleaders of the Bund to justice.

Joan's activities against the Bund having placed her in its black books, her abduction had been planned by its infamous leaders, the Hoffman brothers. Valerie and Joan had cleverly turned the tables on their foes on that memorable night when they had been pursued and attacked by their enemies on the way to Joan's home.

The results of that evening's work had been far reaching. The chums became known throughout the country as "The Invincible Khaki Girls." They had also had the honor of a personal letter from the President of the

United States commanding their presence in Washington.

Proud to obey the great man's mandate, they had made a triumphal journey to the White House, there to receive the President's verbal congratulations and thanks in the name of the Government of the United States.

It was directly after Joan's talk with her father that the summons to go to Washington had come. This in itself was sufficient to establish in the minds of the chums the belief that their formal petition to go to France would be granted.

That it had been was plainly evidenced by the fact that they were holding their little heart-to-heart talk in their own particular corner of a dormitory of a Base Hospital at Crawford's Island.

Here, in company with a number of young women who were on the eve of going to France as Red Cross nurses, the chums were being given a further course of intensive training while they awaited sailing orders.

Though compelled to be in the dormitory, with lights out, by eleven o'clock each night, they were allowed to make frequent trips into the city. Joan's roadster had been placed in a garage, convenient to the dormitory. It proved to be a convenience, indeed, not only to herself and Valerie, but to many of the nurses to whom Joan played chauffeur when they wished to go

into the city. She and Valerie also took turns in driving the roadster on various details for the management of the Base Hospital.

It had been nearly two weeks since they had taken up their abode on Crawford's Island. They were now wearing the style of uniform provided by the Government for its woman ambulance drivers overseas. The ambulances they were to drive over there had already been started on their way across. The Khaki Girls' luggage was packed in anticipation of the call to ship which might come at any moment. France, once but a dear far-off dream to them, would soon become a reality.

Whenever in the city, Valerie and Joan never failed to spend a little time with their dear ones. Saying good-bye at the end of these little visits was their one cross. The suspense of not knowing whether or not it would be the last farewell made each parting a trifle harder to endure than the previous one.

"Then we're not going to-night," declared Joan in response to Valerie's assertion, "for you and I both have passes to go into town to-day. They read from eleven A. M. until eleven P. M. so that doesn't look as if sailing orders were expected to-night."

"I have a queer feeling that this is going to be our last trip to see the folks," confided Valerie. "Between you and me it might be just as well for us to come back early in the evening.

Say by eight o'clock anyway. One never knows what may happen."

Exactly ten minutes later the chums had left the dormitory behind and were started for the garage that accommodated Joan's roadster.

"I hate like sixty to give up my dear old car even for a brand-new ambulance," sighed Joan as her pet car swiftly took the road to town under the guidance of her capable hands. "I'd like to take it over with me."

"I hated to give up my dear old blue standby. You know I turned it over to Stan as a special mark of my affection. I gave him my other two cars, too, but he'll prize the blue one most, because it helped me make good in the Corps."

"That gives me a brilliant idea!" Joan exclaimed with her usual animation. "Since I can't take my roadster along, I'm going to give it to someone who'll appreciate it. I'd arranged with Dad to send a man to the Island for it after I'd sailed. I'll see him to-day and tell him not to 'cause it won't be there."

"Now what are you going to do?" smilingly inquired her chum. She was quite accustomed to Joan's sudden inspirations, generally poured forth into her willing ears.

"I'm going to give—— But first let me ask you, Val, would you mind going back to the Island in a taxi?"

"Not a bit. What I do mind is being kept

in suspense as to the lucky recipient of Joan's pet buzz wagon," teased Valerie.

"I will tell you, my dear Miss Warde," Joan proclaimed dramatically, then giggled. "I'm going to give my car to *Captain Bartram.*"

"That's sweet in you, Joan," was Valerie's warm praise. "Somehow, though she's awfully proud and sensitive, I believe she'd accept it—from you."

"I think so, too," nodded Joan. "You know her car is—well—not *the* sort she ought to have. I wouldn't say it to another soul in the world except you, Val, but I don't believe the captain can afford a new one. A girl in the Corps who has known Captain Bartram for years told me that the captain spent so much money trying to make her husband happy and comfortable after he was crippled that, since his death, she's been almost poor. She has a small income, but that's all.

"She could make lots of money if she chose, because she's so capable. She has been offered ever so many high positions as manager by different business houses. She won't take any of them. Her heart is in this Motor Corps work, and she's going to give herself up to it as long as the war lasts."

Joan's ardent tones conveyed the intensity of her admiration for her former chief.

"She's true blue and I'm ashamed of myself to think I didn't offer her one of my cars. But,

then, I didn't know what you've just told me. I'd noticed that her car was rather an old-timer, but didn't think much about it," explained Valerie contritely.

"I'm glad you didn't," interposed Joan. "I don't mean to be selfish, but it seems as though this roadster ought to belong to her. She's often admired it when I've taken her driving in it."

"I don't think you're selfish, you goose. It's a lovely idea, and just like Joan Mason."

"Thank you, thank you."

Joan grinned cheerfully, though a rosy flush dyed her fair skin.

"You're welcome, you're welcome," mimicked Valerie. "Tell you what you do, Joan. When we get into town drop me at Stan's office. You go on and see your father. I'd love to see him, too, but I'll hardly have time. Stan will hang on to me until the last minute. After you leave your father, go on over to the Corps headquarters and I'll meet you there, say about a quarter to six o'clock. The captain's always there at that time, unless she has a special detail somewhere."

"She won't have one to-day," Joan assured. "I called her on the telephone asking at what time we could run in for a farewell chat to-day. She said any time after four, that she expected to be at headquarters until half-past six. Now that you made me think of giving her my car,

everything will be lovely. We'll ask her to go out with us for a bite to eat and leave her at seven o'clock. That will give us an hour to get back to the Island, so as to be there by eight o'clock."

Having confidently made their plans, the talk drifted into other channels. Fate, however, merely laughed in her sleeve. She intended to take a hand in the carrying out of those same plans.

CHAPTER II

THE WAY THINGS HAPPEN

"THERE!" was Joan's triumphant ejaculation as she hastily dashed an address across an envelope and closed her fountain pen with a snap. Picking up a letter she had just finished writing, a happy little smile curved her lips as she read:

"Dear Captain and Friend:

"Just because I am extravagantly fond of my good old roadster, I am going to pass it on to you. I could not be content to let anyone else have it. When I am in France, doing the work I have dreamed of doing for so long, I shall love to think of you as driving about the big town in 'our' car. Won't you please accept it as a token of my sincere admiration and affection for you? I know that you will because *you* cannot fail to understand the spirit in which it is offered. You will find it waiting for you in front of headquarters.

"When the war is over 'over there' and all's right with the world again, I shall hope to come back to the Corps. I am sure that even after peace comes the Liberty Motor Corps will find plenty to do, and I shall look forward to coming to Attention once more before my dear chief.

"Until then, though widely separated, you will be often with me in thought. If I make good in the Ambulance Corps it will be because you showed me the way. So, you see, it's strictly 'up to me' to be a credit to 'mon Capitaine.'

"With my dearest love and a million good wishes for your continued health and success,

"Your loyal Khaki Girl,

"JOAN MASON."

"Here, Daddykins, *you* read it," she commanded, rising from her father's desk chair and handing him the letter.

Smiling at the impetuous mandate, Mr. Mason obediently complied.

"You win," he commented as he handed the letter back to Joan. "You've left your captain no choice in the matter."

"That's just what I wanted you to say," laughed Joan. "You understand how I feel about it and so will *mon Capitaine.* Anyway she can't help herself. I'm going to give her this letter when I say 'good-bye' with strict

injunctions not to open it until fifteen minutes after I've gone."

"You are a dangerous young person," teased Mr. Mason.

An undertone of sadness lurked beneath the affectionate raillery. Man-like he strove to keep up an appearance of cheerfulness whenever Joan came to see him. None but himself knew how greatly he mourned the loss of her sunny presence in the house.

"I hope I'll prove as much if any hateful old Boche tries to capture me," retorted Joan. "Val says she thinks this will be our last trip into town, Dad."

Joan's bright face suddenly sobered as her blue eyes met her father's somber gaze.

Neither spoke for a moment, yet each understood what was going on in the mind of the other.

"Is there anything more that Dad can do for you, Joan, before you go?"

"No, dearest. You've done everything that can be done. No girl could be better equipped for 'over there' than I, thanks to you. It's hard, Daddykins, but I've got to go now. It's after five and I'm due at headquarters before six. I'd rather you wouldn't go with me. I want to say 'good-bye' here, all alone with you. I'm not going to cry the leastest bit. I'm going away with a smile."

Ten minutes later Joan was driving toward

headquarters feeling as though she would like to cry her eyes out. It had almost broken her heart to part from her father. Though she had bravely assured, "I'll be up again to see you if I can get a pass," the promise had an empty ring.

In the midst of her sadness Joan recalled with dismay the plan she and Valerie had made to invite the captain to eat a hurried dinner with them. It did not accord with the plan she had later made regarding her method of presenting her chief with the roadster. She could only hope to reach headquarters before Valerie and waylay her chum as she entered.

Almost there, to her joy, she saw Valerie swinging along the street ahead of her. A sharp blast of her whistle and a moment later Valerie was stepping into the roadster.

Joan plunged into her explanation with, "We'll have to have our talk with the captain at headquarters, and not ask her to dinner. I don't want her to know about the car until after we've gone. If we took her to dinner any place, we'd go in the car. It would be too awkward for me to give it to her right out just as we were leaving her. She mightn't like it. The other way will be best."

Valerie agreeing, the two presently entered the captain's office, feeling like two benevolent conspirators. Captain Bartram's affectionate

greeting showed clearly her great liking for the Khaki Girls.

"So you think you are on the eve of sailing," she presently said. "Well, I should not be surprised if it were true. One's presentiments often turn out to be correct. I'm glad to have you with me for a last talk. I wish to give my two Invincible Khaki Girls a few bits of advice that may prove valuable in their new life."

"We wish you would. We'll surely try to follow them out," Valerie earnestly promised.

In the absorbing talk that followed, both girls forgot the swift passing of time.

"Joan, it's *seven* o'clock!" finally exclaimed Valerie after a concerned glance at her watch. "We'll have to be hiking."

Joan sprang to her feet in a hurry.

"We wish to get back to the Island by eight," Valerie explained. "Our passes say eleven, but we're going back early just the same."

"A wise idea," approved Captain Bartram. Now on her feet, she continued, "I've a little remembrance for each of you that I think will come in handy."

Reaching under her desk she lifted first one then another square khaki-colored case into view.

"These are emergency kits," she explained. "I bought the articles for them and packed them myself. They are much smaller than suit cases but they hold a good deal. The leather

straps slip over the arm and thus make them as easy to carry as a portfolio. You can stow them away in a comparatively small space and I know you'll find them a real comfort."

"They are certainly darlings and I know we'll love every last thing in them," bubbled Joan. Valerie offered equally enthusiastic and grateful concurrence.

"Now I've kept you five minutes longer than I should have, so you must go at once," was the captain's gentle command. "I won't detain you by going to your car with you. Good-bye, my dears, and good luck, It's strictly unmilitary, but I'm going to kiss both of you."

As they were departing, Joan had slipped her letter into the captain's hand, saying: "Please read this fifteen minutes from now."

Out in the street she paused for an instant before the roadster.

"Good-bye, faithful old thing," she said, patting a shining side of the car. "Behave yourself and take good care of *mon Capitaine*. Come on, Val. Let's beat it in a hurry."

"Here comes a taxi now. Let's hail it." Valerie signaled to the driver of the taxicab, which had now come up almost opposite them.

"We want to go to Base Hospital Number Fifteen, Crawford's Island," she called out to the man. "Can you get us there quickly?"

"That's me," he responded with alacrity, casting an approving glance at the trim, uniformed girls. "Guess you're workin' for Uncle Sam, ain't you?"

"Yes," was the brief reply Valerie made as she and Joan climbed into the taxicab. Neither girl ever volunteered a word more information than was necessary. Long service in the Corps had taught them the value of brevity.

As the taxicab sped along they soon became absorbed in talking over their own affairs. It was still daylight when they started, but by the time the car had won well away from the city the twilight shadows had thickened.

"It seems as if it must have grown dark earlier than usual," Joan irrelevantly remarked, interrupting herself in the midst of something she was telling Valerie.

She had glanced up suddenly to note that night had descended.

"I know it." Valerie consulted her wrist watch as the car passed under an arc light.

"Oh!" she exclaimed sharply. "Do you know what time it is, Joan? It's a quarter to nine! We should have reached the Island long ago! That's certainly queer!"

Making a dive for the speaking tube, she cried out anxiously. "Stop the car. I want to speak to you."

Next instant the taxi had stopped and she was out of it confronting the driver.

"What's the matter?" she demanded. "We should have been at the Island before this."

"I guess not. It's a good two hours' ride," he placidly assured.

"It is not. It takes only an hour without speeding," Valerie curtly contradicted.

Peering frowningly about her, her heart suddenly sank. Dark as it was she at once realized that the shadowed landscape looked unfamiliar.

"You can't never make Stafford's Island in an hour," expostulated the man, "not without speedin'. I ain't takin' no chances with the traffic bulls, neither. I——"

"Stafford's Island!" rang out Valerie's horrified tones. "We don't want to go *there*. I told you Crawford's Island. Do you mean to say that you're taking us to Stafford's Island?"

"Sure. That's where you said. Base Hospital Fifteen, Stafford's Island. That's how you give it to me."

"Oh, what a mess!" groaned Valerie. "Don't you know that Base Hospital Fifteen is at Crawford's and not Stafford's Island?"

"There's a Base Hospital at Stafford's. I s'posed that was the one you wanted," he snapped. "It's the only one there and you *said* Stafford's so you did and I ain't to blame——"

"Never mind about that," cut in Joan, who had now joined Valerie. "All you can do is to turn around and take us to Crawford's Island

as fast as you dare run your car. We've got to get there before eleven o'clock. We've been traveling in an opposite direction from it so you'll just have to hustle."

"It'll cost you some——"

"Never mind that, either." It was Valerie who now interrupted. "Just get us quickly to the Island and you won't lose by it. Come on, Joan."

With this she turned and re-entered the taxi, Joan at her heels. The driver sprang into his seat, muttering darkly concerning "these skirts that don't know where they're goin'." He had a guilty suspicion that he was in the wrong, but would not for worlds have admitted it.

"Did you ever know anything more aggravating?" exploded Joan crossly.

"I should have made sure that he understood," was Valerie's rueful answer. "I'd forgotten that there was such a place as Stafford's Island until he mentioned it. The worst of it is, there's a Base Hospital there, too. It's Number Twelve. I know, because I've had two or three details there."

"I was there once myself," nodded Joan. "It's just one of those stupid mistakes that are so likely to happen. Well, we'll get there before eleven, I guess."

"It will be a close run. After all our pains to try to be early at the dormitory, too."

For a little neither spoke. The taxi was now

in the city again and going at as high a rate of speed as its driver dared travel.

"I'm worried, Val," at last came rather nervously from Joan. "This mistake has upset me, I guess. I keep feeling all the time as if—well—we might find when we reached the Island—that——"

"Our ship had sailed," supplemented Valerie. "I feel that way about it, too. When I spoke to Captain Bartram about getting back early to the Island, something seemed to warn me that we ought to do it. It was just a foolish presentiment, I guess. As long as we had permission to be out until eleven o'clock, there's really no foundation for it. We're both nervous now because we've been taken on this wild goose chase. Don't worry, pal. Everything will probably turn out all right. We've been lucky thus far in dodging trouble."

Valerie spoke with her usual optimism. Either she did not know or else had quite forgotten the old superstition that to boast of immunity from trouble is the surest way to court it.

CHAPTER III

A FRIEND IN NEED

"HOW long since the order came? What ship?"

The hoarse tones freighted with dismay, sounded utterly unlike Valerie Warde's usually cheery accents.

"Almost two hours ago. The *Mercedes.* It was quite unexpected. No one knew where to reach you. It is very unfortunate but——"

"Come on, Val! Perhaps we can make it yet!" cried Joan wildly.

Two uniformed figures wheeled and dashed from the office of Base Hospital Number Fifteen. Down the steps, along a stretch of stone walk and onto the highway the mad flight continued toward the ways where the *Mercedes* had, perhaps, not yet weighed anchor.

"The *Mercedes;* where is she?" demanded a breathless voice. Its owner had caught the arm of an American naval officer who was preparing to board a motor boat anchored at the dock.

"She pulled out over an hour ago."

The officer, a young ensign, courteously responded, raising his cap. He eyed the two excited young women in mild amazement.

"What *shall* we do? Oh, Val, it's—too—*awful!*"

"I don't know. Go back to—the—hospital—I—suppose," faltered Valerie miserably.

"I won't. I want to go to France. It's—it's—too—dreadful to be left behind like this. There must be some way that we can catch up with the ship, since she's only been gone an hour. Isn't your boat fast enough to overtake the *Mercedes?*"

Joan frantically addressed the young officer.

"I am sorry I cannot help you," he said. "This boat is a submarine chaser. We have just docked here for a forty-eight-hour layover. If I were in command I might be able to get you aboard the *Mercedes.* As it is——"

His shrug was eloquent of the impossibility of such a proceeding.

"We must find someone to take us to the *Mercedes;* that's all. Come on, Val."

Too much upset to thank the ensign for his well-meant sympathy, Joan raced on down the long, brightly lighted dock, Valerie in her wake. Far below where the motor boat rode the water she had sighted a number of uniformed men getting out of a motor car that had driven onto the wharf.

"What—are—you—going—to—do, Joan?" panted Valerie.

"Make—these—men—help—us," was the answer, equally short-breathed.

"Won't you please tell us if there is any way we can overtake the *Mercedes?*" Joan had forged into the midst of the group, unmindful of everything but their own unhappy plight.

"What's this? I beg your pardon. What seems to be the trouble?"

A middle-aged man in the uniform worn by a commander of the United States Navy, stood with bared head looking down in puzzled fashion at Joan's lovely, worried face. His officer companions had also stopped, caps off to beauty in distress.

"Why, Major La Salle!"

It was Valerie who cried out. Reaching the group of men she had spied first a sky blue uniform, then a familiar face.

"Don't you remember me?" she asked, then blushed at her own temerity. "I am Private Warde of the Liberty Motor Corps. I was detailed to meet you one day at the Pennsylvania Sta——"

"I do, indeed, remember. Of late I have had great reason to be pleased that I have the honor to know you."

Beaming, the distinguished Frenchman extended a cordial hand to Valerie. It was evident that he was referring to the good work of

the Khaki Girls while in the Motor Corps.

Amazed at this new turn of affairs, Joan had become momentarily robbed of speech. Before she could recover sufficiently to reply to the questions addressed her by the naval commander, Valerie had the field and was pouring forth an excited account of their misfortune. In her anxiety she had quite overlooked the major's significant remark.

"We simply must go across on the *Mercedes*. Isn't there some way open for us? We can't bear to be left behind like this. I don't know how such things are done, but I do know that the ship isn't so far away but that we could make it if we only knew the best and quickest way to do it," she concluded, a desperate plea for help vibrating in every word she uttered.

"This is of a truth most unfortunate for the young ladies, is it not?"

Major La Salle cast an inquiring glance about the group of men who were regarding the Khaki Girls with decided interest and concern.

"It is, indeed," agreed the commander to whom Joan had first spoken. "I supposed the *Mercedes* would be here at least two days longer. One never knows. These are days of uncertainty for us all. I am afraid you could not possibly catch up with the ship now. You are not prepared to sail. It would take too much time to go back for your luggage, even if

I were to send you on in one of our fastest launches. Besides, you see——"

"We have our papers with us. These kits are sufficient for our needs," Joan hastily interrupted. "We are ready to go *now* if you can help us to go. Oh, won't you *please* help us?"

"But now I have the plan!" exclaimed the major. "Why would it not be possible to take the young ladies with us. We are to proceed at once down the coast. We shall no doubt overtake the *Mercedes* within three hours. It will be but a short cruise. We shall place them soon safely aboard the ship on which they have the right to be. Miss Warde is, of a certainty, my esteemed friend—thus *her* friend becomes also——"

"Pardon me, Major La Salle," broke in Valerie. "I forgot to introduce you to my friend and chum, Miss Joan Mason. She was with me in the Motor Corps and we received our commissions as ambulance drivers at the same time."

"I am most delighted," the major gracefully acknowledged the introduction. "You must, indeed, be the Miss Mason who, with Miss Warde, was recently honored by President Wilson. France is fortunate, I assure you," he complimented, making an elaborate bow. "Allow me to present formally to you Captain Beach, also my brother officers." In turn he presented the other officers to the two girls.

"Do you mean to tell me, Major, that these young ladies are the 'Invincible Khaki Girls' whom we've all admired through reading of them in the newspapers?" asked the commander, almost incredulously.

"It is indeed true," the major proudly answered. "Is it not also a sufficient reason to grant the request I make of you?"

"Absolutely, yet there are reasons——"

Captain Beach paused and looked doubtfully at the Khaki Girls.

"I should be honored to have you on board the destroyer as my guests," he continued courteously, "except that I am not convinced in my mind as to the advisability of such a proceeding. I am sorry that I can offer no clearer explanation. It seems most inexplicable, but——"

Again he paused. It was hard to watch the eager girlish faces drop into downcast lines as he talked. After all, it would mean but a matter of three or four hours of sailing straight down the coast. He would see that the *Hornet*, the destroyer he commanded, lost no time in catching up with the *Mercedes*.

"I will take you," he announced with a sudden decision that brought radiance to two downcast faces. "We must get under way at once if we are to put you safely on board the *Mercedes* to-night. I will send them a wireless message as soon as I go aboard."

Hardly able to believe their good fortune, Joan and Valerie broke into grateful thanks.

"Don't thank me. Thank the major. But for him I'm afraid I should never have consented to such a thing," commented the commander with a somewhat grim smile. "Come, we must lose no time going aboard." He now addressed his companions.

With this he turned abruptly and strode on ahead toward where a launch was tied up. The little knot of officers followed him, courteously refraining from discussing the amazing situation among themselves. Joan and Valerie bought up the rear, walking beside the major.

"Captain Beach just hates to take us on board the *Hornet,*" Valerie ruefully confided to Major La Salle and Joan. "We're imposing upon him and he knows it. We can never be grateful enough to you, Major, for helping us out."

"It is nothing," disavowed the officer with an amiable wave of the hand. "It is fortunate that I chanced to be here to-night. I had expected to join Captain Beach at a certain southern port where the *Hornet* will presently anchor. A telegram from him was responsible for this change of plan. To do this small favor for you he will be put to no trouble. But he is the man's man. *Vous comprenez?*"

"We surely do," smiled Joan. "You've characterized him in one sentence."

"It is sufficient," shrugged the Frenchman, and immediately changed the subject. The Khaki Girls were careful to ask no questions concerning the major's presence on board. His vague explanation of it hinted at concealment rather than revelation.

The trio had now come up with the officers, who stood waiting on the dock until their stranded guests should be assisted into the launch.

It was a short ride from the dock to where the destroyer rode at anchor. Despite the knowledge that they were not strictly welcome on board the *Hornet,* the prospect of a cruise, however short, on a real destroyer, was decidedly thrilling to Joan and Valerie.

Left to themselves in the captain's cabin, to which he had immediately conducted them, the two sat staring at each other for a moment, then burst into subdued laughter.

"*What* would Dad say?" gasped Joan.

"What would *Stan* say?" countered Valerie.

"I know what Captain Bartram would say." Joan's mirthful features sobered a trifle. "She'd say that the end justified the means. It's the truth, too. Back in civil life we'd no more think of doing this than we would of trying to enlist in the Army. But it's different now. We're serving our country just as much as are any of these officers on board the *Hornet.* We're their comrades. That gives us the right

to demand help when we need it. This captain can't see that. I know perfectly well he looks upon us as a nuisance, just because we're girls. If the major hadn't mentioned us as the 'Invincible Khaki Girls' he wouldn't have bothered with us at all."

"That's what I thought. It probably gave him an idea that we weren't quite helpless propositions, so he decided to put up with us. I'll bet he'll speed up this boat, though, so as to get rid of us as soon as he can," predicted Valerie with a soft giggle.

As it happened both girls had misjudged Captain Beach, as they were presently to discover.

CHAPTER IV

GUESTS ON SUFFERANCE

ON going aboard the *Hornet,* Captain Beach immediately took steps to pick up the *Mercedes* by wireless. It merely added to his disapproval to learn that she had headed out to sea and intended to keep fifty miles from shore on her journey down the coast. A dangerous stretch of shoals, due south of her starting point, extended out for a distance of ten miles. These shoals forbade the *Hornet's* cutting across seas. It meant to the captain the added delay of following almost in the *Mercedes'* tracks until the *Hornet* caught up with her at a certain ocean rendezvous where she was to meet her convoy.

"A nice state of affairs," he muttered to himself, after receiving the wireless message. "Two hours the start of us, and the *Mercedes* a fast boat. That means it will be daylight when we come up with her."

Shortly thereafter the engine room received

an order that served to send the *Hornet* dashing through the water at an increased rate of speed. The captain purposed, as Valerie had said, to get rid of his self-imposed charges as soon as possible, but not for the reasons she had attributed to him.

Meanwhile, in his cabin, Valerie and Joan were deep in an investigation of the contents of the mysterious kits presented to them by Captain Bartram. Packed with a view toward fortifying the Khaki Girls against a time of need "over there," each of the kits contained not only two complete changes of underwear, but towels, handkerchiefs, hosiery, pins, needles, thread, as well as a number of small toilet accessories.

"These things will help us out wonderfully!" exclaimed Joan as she busied herself with the repacking of the useful kit. "Without them we'd have to borrow of the girls on the *Mercedes* until we got across. We can cable for our stuff as soon as we reach France. We'll have to have the extra uniforms so we might as well have all of our luggage, though a lot of it could be replaced in France. Anyway, it's all packed and ready so it won't be any trouble to ship."

"*Mon Capitaine* didn't know how soon her present would be used, did she?" smiled Valerie.

"She certainly knew what we'd need most,

anyway," remarked Joan. "There, I've repacked my kit just as it was when I opened it. My, but I'm sleepy. I wonder what has become of the major. We've certainly been left alone in our glory."

"Very likely he thinks we want to rest and so won't intrude. He is the politest of polite, isn't he?"

"He's an old dear," yawned Joan. "I wish we dared to go on deck. I'd like to get a whiff of sea air. Then I could keep awake. I don't want to go to sleep. This is probably the only cruise you and I will ever have on a real warship and I can't afford to miss a minute of it. What time was it when we came aboard, Val? Did you notice? I forgot to."

"Yes; it was just eleven-thirty. It's now five minutes to one. I wonder——"

A peremptory rapping on the cabin door caused Valerie to drop the kit she was in the act of strapping.

Joan started violently, then called out a clear "Come."

Instantly the door was flung open and Captain Beach stepped into the room. Close behind him came the major. The captain was frowning darkly. Both girls noted that at first glance. Neither did they miss the worried expression in plain evidence on the Frenchman's face.

"What—what—is—it?" faltered Joan,

springing nervously from the deep arm-chair she had been occupying.

"I have bad news for you."

Captain Beach spoke in a dry, "I-told-you-so" tone.

"Bad—news?" Valerie paled as she faltered forth the words.

"I have received orders to proceed straight across. I should have adhered to my first decision not to take you young ladies on board the ship. It was poor judgment on my part."

As he talked the captain had begun to walk nervously up and down the cabin, head bent, brows contracted in an even deeper frown.

Joan and Valerie stared at each other in aghast silence.

"But would it not then be possible to return with them to shore?" suggested the major.

Their guardian, pro tem, the gallant Frenchman, felt it incumbent upon him to propose some way out of the difficulty.

"It can't be done. I have my orders. They mean but one thing, 'straight across,'" was the grim verdict. "If it were possible to deviate from them I would see these young women safely aboard the *Mercedes* rather than take them back. That can't be done either. I've been afraid of some such hitch ever since we left port."

"But what are we to do?" Joan asked, almost piteously. "We can't go ashore. We

can't go on the *Mercedes,* and we can't stay here. I don't see——"

"You will *have* to remain on board the *Hornet,*" cut in the commander with heavy emphasis. "It is the one thing for you to do. There can be no choice in the matter. We shall probably encounter an American liner, homeward bound, before we get very far out. I'll arrange with its commander to take you to shore."

"O—h—h!"

Joan's long-drawn-out ejaculation sounded more like a groan of despair.

"What if we met one going *across?*" demanded Valerie with a rising inflection on the last word that denoted forlorn hope.

"I'll put you on it," was the prompt reply. "So much the better for you if we do. Understand, though, the first ship we meet either going or coming will be *yours.*"

Captain Beach's lips closed in a firm line on the "yours."

"Very well," agreed Joan with decided coolness. "I am sure we regret extremely having put you to so much trouble. We did not intend to be inconsiderate. We couldn't possibly know that—that——"

She paused, biting her lip. There were tears just back of her blue eyes. They were tears of sheer mortification. It was too humiliating, she thought resentfully, to be thus plainly informed that the sooner they left the *Hornet* the

better pleased would be this lowering-browed, hateful man.

"Of course you couldn't know."

Half-amused, half-touched by Joan's rally of girlish pride to her aid, the captain's brusque tones lost their harsh ring as he made this acknowledgment.

"My dear child," he continued kindly, "I am attaching the blame for this unpleasant predicament you are now in to no one but myself. There are a great many things relative to the sailing of this ship that no one but myself is allowed to know. I am free to confess that I made a serious mistake in allowing you to come aboard. Believe that I shall do all in my power to rectify it."

"We understand that fully, Captain Beach."

Recovered from the first shock of surprise and consternation, Valerie had again become her usual optimistic self. Smiling brightly at the discomfited captain she continued:

"We shall hold ourselves in readiness to do whatever you think best for us. Of course we can't help hoping that we'll be put on a boat going across rather than on one going back to the United States. After all, it means only a short delay if we do have to go back. Just so we reach France in time to do our bit before the Germans are defeated and the war's over. That's the main idea."

This plucky acceptance of the situation

brought a smile of reluctant admiration to the commander's stern features.

"I like your spirit," he commended. "We'll do the best we can for you and trust to luck to get us out of this mess. Until we sight and hail a ship that will take you off the *Hornet* my cabin is at your disposal. Please make yourselves as comfortable as possible. I will order you a bite to eat. You must be hungry by this time. A touch of this button will bring my orderly. He will attend to your wants. Good-night."

The commander promptly took himself off, accompanied by the major, who lingered briefly to express voluble regret at the situation, along with optimistic predictions that morning would inevitably see them safely aboard a passing liner.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," were Joan's first words as the cabin door closed behind the major's stalwart form. "This is the worst mix-up we've ever gotten into, Val."

"Don't I know it?"

Dropping into a chair Valerie eyed her chum with a comical air of resignation that was too much for Joan. She did not cry. She giggled instead.

That infectious giggle provoked a mate from Valerie. It also cleared away much of the depression both felt.

"I don't want to go back to the U. S.," Va-

lerie declared almost savagely. "I'm shaking in my shoes for fear that liner we've been hearing about will be homeward bound."

"Neither do I want to go home," echoed Joan. "Honestly, Val, isn't it dreadful to have all our wonderful plans for the voyage turn out like this. Here we are, a couple of castaways on a warship, where goodness knows we aren't wanted and don't want to be. I've had enough experience with destroyers to last me all the rest of my life."

"All on account of that stupid old taxi driver, too," reminded Valerie gloomily. "If he hadn't made that mistake we'd be on the *Mercedes* now."

"I know it. If we have to go home, *when* do you suppose we'll get a chance to start for France in earnest?" Joan inquired anxiously.

"Oh, in a week after we land. Maybe in less time than that. Boats are going across every day with war workers. We won't be blamed for this, pal. It wasn't our fault. We have our passes to show for that."

"I'd rather go over on a—well—on a cattle boat than be taken back now," was Joan's energetic declaration.

"So would I. We'd better try to get a little sleep, I guess," Valerie wisely proposed. "Let's investigate the captain's quarters and do as he said—make ourselves comfortable."

A little judicious prowling revealed a tiny

bathroom which they hailed with joy. By the time they had bathed hands and faces a rapping on the cabin door signified that their midnight luncheon had arrived. As both had gone dinnerless, they hungrily devoured the sandwiches and cocoa which the tray contained.

While they ate and talked and wondered and speculated with that joyous facility for throwing off trouble which youth alone enjoys, in a stateroom far removed from the captain's quarters, the commander was holding a private confab with the major. The captain was doing most of the talking. The gravity of what he was saying plainly had its effect upon his companion.

"It's a bad matter all around. I'm proceeding across according to special orders and I can't deviate from a certain course. By ten o'clock this morning we'll be out of the path of liners, coming or going. This detail calls for high speed. I can't waste time hunting up a boat suitable to put these girls on. I've got to consider their welfare. I can't put them aboard any old boat that happens along with an escort from ship. I can't spare a man and you're under orders of your own to stay aboard the *Hornet* and go across.

"On the other hand," he pointed out energetically, "I don't want them aboard the *Hornet,* and you know why. You can see for yourself how it would be if——"

He paused, his gray eyes resting on the major with significant meaning.

"I'll post a lookout the minute it's light," he added with decision. "The first liner hailed will be theirs. I will say for them that they are a plucky pair. Under different circumstances I'd be almost willing to take them across. They have more spirit and independence than any girls I've ever run across. Don't doubt they'll make good in the Ambulance Corps. As it is, I sha'n't rest easy until those two youngsters are off the *Hornet.*"

CHAPTER V

GETTING USED TO THE "HORNET"

IT was broad daylight when a brisk tattoo on the cabin door awakened the Khaki Girls from a sound sleep. The captain's berth being sufficiently wide to hold them both, they had gladly climbed into it and gone to sleep within five minutes after retiring.

"Eight o'clock," informed a deep, pleasant voice. "At what time do you wish breakfast?"

"In twenty minutes," promptly returned Valerie. "That's lots of time," she commented to Joan as she sprang from the berth. "As long as we didn't *undress* we won't have to dress. We'll wash the sleep out of our eyes, do our hair over again, and be ready for whatever comes."

"I'm crazy to go on deck," sighed Joan. "Shut up in this cabin, I feel like a prisoner. I'd like to take a look around this old boat before we're put off of it. I'm going to ask the major to show us about as soon as we've had

breakfast. I wouldn't dare ask the captain. He might eat me."

"He's not so cross as all that," defended Valerie, casting a smile at Joan's half-pouting lips. "I felt peeved with him for a while last night. Then I was ashamed of myself. You can't blame him for wanting to get rid of us when he's under special orders to do something or other that he can't possibly divulge to a soul. You know how it was in the Corps. We wouldn't have liked it a bit if we'd had somebody thrust upon us by accident when we were out on a secret detail."

"I hadn't looked at it in that light," Joan admitted reluctantly. "Oh, well, he can't wish us away any harder than we wish it ourselves."

Further conversation on the subject died out as the chums busied themselves with freshening-up for breakfast. In precisely twenty minutes it appeared and they fell hungrily to, their appetites keen enough to do full justice to the excellent meal served them.

Breakfast eaten, Valerie rang for the orderly and despatched him with a message to Major La Salle that soon brought the latter to the cabin.

"Will you take us on deck, Major?" Joan requested, the instant she had greeted the officer.

"With pleasure. You will, no doubt, be interested to see something of a warship like the

Hornet. I have already been instructed by our captain to do the honors."

"I hope we'll have time for a little peep at the *Hornet* before our liner heaves in sight," commented Valerie. "That is likely to be at almost any minute, though, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes. It is, of a certainty, strange that we have as yet seen none such."

There was a note of carefully suppressed anxiety in the major's voice that arrested the attention of both girls. It came to both simultaneously that the Frenchman was distinctly worried.

"But we'll run across one soon, won't we?" quickly questioned Joan.

"Very soon, I trust." His assurance lacked heartiness. "Shall we not now go on deck?"

His unwillingness to discuss further the probability of just how soon a liner might appear gave the chums food for uneasy reflection. It was almost as if the major had expressed a belief that their chances for a speedy transfer from the destroyer were dubious. Both became convinced in the same instant that the officer knew more than he cared to divulge.

Following their guide on deck, the Khaki Girls' newly fledged apprehensions took swift wing before the majesty of old Ocean. It was a glorious morning in early summer, and the sea lay, a vast expanse of shimmering green in the radiance of the sun's warm rays. A fairly

stiff breeze was blowing from the west which merely added to the sudden exhilaration the two girls felt as they drew in deep breaths of the salt air.

"Isn't it splendiferous, Val!" Joan exclaimed as her blue eyes drank in the wonder of rolling green waves and blue cloud-flecked sky. "I'm *so* glad I never get seasick. Ever since I can remember Dad has sailed his own yacht. That's why I happen to be a good sailor."

"Oh, dear, I don't want to go back!" Valerie cried out with sudden irrelevancy. "I'd love to keep right on sailing on the *Hornet.* She's certainly some speedy boat. Isn't she, Major?"

Valerie appealed for corroboration to the Frenchman, who stood behind her at the deck rail, a pair of binoculars to his eyes.

"*Pardonnez moi,*" he excused, almost absently, as he lowered the glasses and turned to the pretty questioner beside him.

"I said the *Hornet* was a speedy boat," Valerie repeated, "and that I'd love to keep right on sailing on her."

"It is just possible that you will have your desire," he returned very gravely. "From now on the *Hornet's* course must hourly become more lonely. Already we are off the beaten track followed by incoming liners. Boats we may encounter, yes, but not such as would serve your purpose. Perhaps you will be one, two, three, even more, days on this ship. It is im-

possible to say now how long you will remain here. Since before dawn the lookout has been posted. Thus far he has reported nothing of interest to you."

"Well, if we can't get off the *Hornet* without jumping overboard, I guess we'll have to stay on it, even if we're not wanted," declared Joan with a touch of defiance. "We can't help feeling awfully foolish, of course, knowing we were making it unpleasant for Captain Beach, but——"

"Not unpleasant in the sense you mean, Mademoiselle Mason." The Frenchman raised a deprecating hand.

"You do not understand the situation. I regret that I cannot enlighten you except under certain circumstances which I trust may not arise. But, come, let us forget the unhappy subject. I shall be delighted to show you about ship. Shall we not continue to hope that all may yet be well?"

Decidedly mystified at the major's vague references to a situation concerning which they were wholly in the dark, the Khaki Girls forbore asking a single question. Both were unusually silent, for them, as they made a tour of the ship under the major's guidance.

Interest in exploring the nooks and crannies of a real war vessel served to partially lift the sense of depression that Joan and Valerie had begun to experience. It was "positively thrill-

ing" to quote Valerie to be able to view the big guns at close range. Set down suddenly as they had been in a man's world it was extremely fascinating to watch the nimble sailors going about their daily routine of ship duty.

It was almost noon when they finished their sight-seeing tour and again found themselves alone in their quarters. During that tour no announcement of "Ship Ahoy!" had reached them. So far as they could see the ocean seemed to be practically deserted by all craft save the *Hornet*. As a matter of fact one or two schooners, a cattle boat and a tramp steamer had been sighted. They might as well not have appeared at all, so far as their being of use to the Khaki Girls was concerned.

"What do you think about this business, Val?" demanded Joan the moment they were alone together.

"Oh, a lot of things."

"Tell me some of them, then."

"Well, one of them is that a destroyer's a fighting craft. That's why we're not wanted on it. The longer we stay on it the more chance we run of seeing a real fight. For all we know it may be heading for the war zone to help the British chase submarines. It's something of the sort or the captain wouldn't be so anxious to get rid of us."

"Then why doesn't he say so and be done with it?" cried Joan in exasperation.

"For the same reason that kept us mum about our secret details in the Corps. Besides, why should he tell us when he expects to get rid of us. He wouldn't say a word if he were allowed to, which he isn't. Very likely no one but the major knows the facts. He probably is concerned in the detail in some way."

Having delivered this sage opinion Valerie walked dispiritedly to a chair and sat down. It had been borne upon her with unpleasant force that she and Joan had rashly leaped before they looked.

"We had no business trying to catch up with the *Mercedes,*" was her next remark after an interval of gloomy silence, during which Joan had sat staring fixedly at a print on the cabin wall. "What do you suppose they're saying and thinking about us back at the hospital?"

"I've been wondering about that very thing," nodded Joan. "When we went out of there in such a hurry and then never went back it would look to the hospital folks as though we had got safely aboard the *Mercedes* before she sailed. If they thought that then they wouldn't bother themselves further about us.

"On the other hand, the crowd on the *Mercedes* know we were left behind, so they wouldn't concern themselves about us either. Our sudden disappearance won't be noticed and it's a good thing for us. On account of war workers having to preserve so much secrecy

about going over, our own folks will never know what a mix-up we're in until we get home after the war."

"Unless we meet a ship soon and are carted back to the U. S.," reminded Valerie.

"Val," Joan's voice held a note of suppressed triumph, "I have a queer feeling that we're on this ship to stay until we land in France. Unless we meet a liner within a day or so we're not apt to run into one afterward. At the rate we're traveling we'll soon be on the high seas. The *Hornet* is making a bee-line across the Atlantic, unless I'm very much mistaken."

CHAPTER VI

FINDING THEIR PLACE

JOAN'S hope that the Khaki Girls would be forced to stick to the *Hornet* until she touched France seemed likely to be realized. Four days had come and gone and they were still the guests of Captain Beach. They had seen very little of their host, however, since their first morning aboard the destroyer. Of his own accord he held himself strictly aloof from his unwelcome charges, leaving to Major La Salle the social amenities, such as they were.

Even in so short a period of time as four days the Khaki Girls had become quite at home on the *Hornet*. Though they longed to rove about the ship at will they were careful not to transgress in this respect.

Unless in the company of the infallible major, they went no farther than the deck nearest to the captain's cabin. The orderly continued to bring them their meals to the cabin. This they

readily construed as meaning that the commander wished them to keep to themselves.

In the beginning they meekly fell in with this arrangement. Neither was satisfied with it for a particular reason over which they had more than one earnest discussion as time passed and no liner appeared to take them off the destroyer.

It was on the afternoon of the fifth day that Valerie proposed that the two take action on the subject they had so frequently debated.

"We can't go on like this, Joan," she protested. "It's not fair to Captain Beach. I've decided that we ought to go straight to him and have things out with him."

"I'm willing. He won't listen to us, though. He'll insist on continuing to make himself uncomfortable just because he feels it to be an unpleasant duty," Joan predicted.

"We'll make him listen," returned Valerie firmly. "I've thought out exactly what I'm going to say to him. On second thought, I guess we'd better send for him to come to us. This is going to be a strictly confidential argument."

"Don't be too sure that the captain will accept your cordial invitation to an arguing bee," laughed Joan. "He may be busy. Worse, he may send back word that he's busy, even if he isn't."

"No, he won't do that. If he's not engaged

at the moment he'll pay us a call, looking like an early Christian martyr."

Fifteen minutes after Valerie had despatched her message, Captain Beach knocked at the door of the cabin he had relinquished in the name of courtesy.

"Good afternoon, Captain Beach."

Valerie had been quick to open the door to her august visitor.

"Won't you walk into my cabin? I mean *your* cabin?" she emphasized, her lovely face breaking into the smile that made her so charming.

"Thank you."

Stepping into the cabin, the commander cast a quick glance from one to the other of the two girls, as if trying to discover from the expressions of the youthful faces the reason for requesting his presence.

"Please sit down, Captain," invited Valerie. "We sent for you because we've decided on something we wish to do. In fact, we *insist* on doing it if it can possibly be arranged."

"If what you wish can be arranged, Miss Warde, no insistence will be necessary," was the courteous answer.

Waiting until Valerie had seated herself beside Joan, who was occupying a leather-covered settee, the commander dropped into his own pet chair, a deep-seated leather one. A flash, very like satisfaction, crossed his face as he settled

into it. Watching him, Valerie made mental note of it and smiled to herself.

"I was sure you'd say so." A mischievous light had leaped into her eyes. "What we feel we must do is this—give you back your cabin. It's not fair to deprive you of it any longer. If you can arrange to give us some other little corner on the ship for our own, we can get along beautifully."

"I wouldn't consider for a moment doing such a thing," the commander's jaws came together with a snap. "You are quite welcome to the use of my quarters as long as you are on board."

"But we may be here until the end of the voyage," Valerie argued. "We've been trouble enough to you already, and we feel dreadful about it. We've come to the point where we think we ought not be treated as just guests. We'd like to make ourselves useful and try to do our bit aboard ship.

"Why can't you look upon us as a couple of willing workers and give us something to do while we're waiting for our ship to come in?" she pleaded. "Enroll us as honorary members of the crew, give us a stateroom of our own, and let us show you that we can be a help here instead of a pair of useless loafers."

"Tell me, what do you think you could do on board a ship like this?"

The question just missed being satirical. A

faint flicker of amusement touched the commander's firm lips.

"A great many things. Help Lieutenant Ramsey, the chaplain, for instance. His desk is piled up with work. I heard him saying yesterday to another officer that he wished he had some help. We can both operate a typewriting machine. We've taken the Oath of Allegiance to the Government, so we can be trusted with the typing of reports, letters, etc. To-morrow's Sunday. Why not let us take part in the services on the after-deck. Miss Mason plays and sings beautifully. I can sing a little. We might arrange to give a concert some evening. We could help out at the canteen, if you needed the men there for other purposes."

"Yes, and we've had First Aid practice, too," put in Joan. "We could help prepare diet for men in hospital. If the *Hornet* got into a fight we could do our part in caring for the wounded."

"So you think the *Hornet* may go into action. Well, you're quite correct on that score."

The commander stared hard at the Khaki Girls.

"That's precisely the reason I wish you were both on a safer craft. No telling what may happen to her as we sail nearer the danger zone," he emphasized. "That's another good reason for my wishing you to retain my quarters. You're more secure here than any place else on

the ship. As for putting you to work I don't doubt that you could make yourselves useful. I'll see what I can find you to do."

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed two glad voices in unison.

"Allow *me* to thank *you* instead for your offer." The man's stern features had grown strangely mild. "I am afraid I haven't been a very gracious host since you came aboard. I'm likely to prove a hard taskmaster. The minute you become part of the crew you're subject to my stern authority, you know," he reminded with grim humor.

"That's the way we'd like you to treat us," declared Joan. "We want to be just workers who expect no favors. We want to find our place and fill it as best we can, whether it's on the *Hornet* or in the Ambulance Corps. We're used to hard work and like it. If we hadn't trained with that idea in mind we wouldn't be much of a success as ambulance drivers behind the lines."

"That's a clinching argument," heartily conceded the commander. "I am very glad to have had this talk with you. Back home I've a daughter very near the age of you girls, I should say. Perhaps that may help you to understand my anxiety for your welfare. I hadn't stopped to consider you as an efficient part of this big war machine. So many young women have gone across only to hamper instead

of help. I'm positive that you won't be added to that long list of failures.

"Well, let's get down to business. How would you like to come to the officers' mess hereafter for your meals? You've already been introduced to my staff. You're going to become members of the crew. You are now for that matter. You might as well get better acquainted with your fellow workers. I'll wager I'm the only commander of a destroyer who has ever had or will have a feminine addition to his staff."

Apparently much amused with the idea the captain actually laughed aloud. In that moment of mirth the Khaki Girls forever lost all awe of him. From a stern commander he had been suddenly transformed into a genial, kindly person who no longer regarded them as a troublesome burden.

"Did we win? Well, I guess," crowed Valerie, when Captain Beach had finally departed in a far better humor than he had come.

"We're something more than just Khaki Girls now," exulted Joan. "We're honorary members of the *Hornet's* crew. Give us time and we'll show our worthy commander that we're not slackers. We'll make ourselves so useful that he'll forget all about wanting to put us off the *Hornet.*"

CHAPTER VII

HONORARY MEMBERS OF THE CREW

THAT evening the Khaki Girls had the novel experience of dining with Captain Beach and his staff at a real officers' mess. With the usual readiness of the American man to accept his countrywomen as wonder workers, every officer present showed his marked approval of the stand Valerie and Joan had taken.

Chaplain Ramsey, a fine, up-standing man of perhaps forty years, seemed signally pleased with the prospect of having two such able coadjutors. Dinner over, the trio repaired to the girls' cabin and busied themselves with arranging a little musical program for Sunday morning services. As it chanced, the sailor who usually presided at the piano at Sunday morning singing lay sick in hospital at the moment. In consequence the chaplain hailed the Khaki Girls' offer as providential.

"Don't expect to see the crew turn out to

services to-morrow morning," he told Joan and Valerie. "Often my congregation is very small. I conduct services only for those men who desire to attend. There is no compulsion about it. Sometimes not more than twenty men are present.

"While I was chaplain on board the *Winnebago* I often had as high as two hundred men at church. We had an orchestra there and that drew them. Nothing like music to make these youngsters turn out to religious services. I'm going to play a joke on them this time," he said boyishly. "I sha'n't announce my new helpers beforehand. But wait until *next* Sunday! You'll see the boys flocking to the after deck to church."

"I only hope we'll be here then," smiled Valerie. "I don't believe Captain Beach would transfer us to a *homebound* liner now. We must be almost halfway across the Atlantic. But we might catch up with one going over—then good-bye to the *Hornet* for us."

"Much as I should appreciate your help in my work, I could hardly be otherwise than relieved to see you safely away from here."

The chaplain's features grew grave.

"We're not a bit afraid," Joan stoutly protested. "I mean we shouldn't mind being under fire. If we were on a liner we'd run a chance of being torpedoed by a submarine. If we were driving an ambulance behind the lines we'd be

exposed to shell fire. It's about as broad as it is long, I should say."

"It's not a question of keeping safe with us," supplemented Valerie warmly. "Why, we nearly worked our heads off in the Motor Corps just to get the chance to be in the big fight. So you can't expect us to worry over possible danger to ourselves."

A gleam of admiration lighted the chaplain's serious brown eyes.

"In the presence of valor I must bow to it," was his gallant tribute. "Your mention of the Motor Corps reminds me that an old friend of mine is at its head. Captain Bartram——"

"Oh, do *you* know '*mon Capitaine*'?" broke in Valerie rapturously.

"Very well, indeed. Her family and mine were neighbors for years. I have not seen her since just before the war in Europe began. I have followed her doings through the newspapers. Occasionally I receive a letter from her. Lieutenant Bartram, her husband, and I were boys together."

This delightful information set the Khaki Girls' tongues wagging in energetic praise of their former chief. Concerning their own exploits in the Corps they were silent until urged to talk of them by the chaplain. Both fought shy of mentioning the important part they had taken in bringing the Hoffmann Brothers to justice.

To their infinite relief he made no reference to it, thereby leading them to conclude that he had not been informed by either the major or the commander that the latest recruits on the *Hornet* were the "Invincible Khaki Girls." Nor was it until afterward that he learned the truth under circumstances which amply proved their right to the title.

In return for the colorful accounts the girls gave of their experiences in the Motor Corps, the chaplain had a fund of anecdotes, both grave and gay, to relate concerning his long service as sky-pilot on board various United States cruisers.

Thus the evening passed more rapidly than had any other since their arrival on shipboard. Shortly before ten o'clock Chaplain Ramsey left them. Half an hour later the Khaki Girls turned in for the night, well pleased with their new status on board the *Hornet.*

Sunday proved a red-letter day for them. Contrary to the chaplain's warning concerning a small congregation, every row of benches on the after deck overflowed with sailor boys.

On a ship the size of the *Hornet* it does not take news long to travel the rounds. Valerie and Joan suspected that one of the staff officers whom they had met at mess had started the ball rolling. Nor were they greatly surprised to see Captain Beach stroll in just before services began and take a seat in the background.

Afterward both agreed in private that they had never heard anything more inspiring than that chorus of lusty boyish voices lifted in the singing of the several hymns which Joan had chosen as being most familiar to all. Knowing the world-wide popularity of that beautiful, sacred selection "Calvary," she had elected to render it as a solo.

Coming to the yearning refrain, "Rest, rest for the weary," a mist rushed to her eyes and her clear, high soprano voice faltered on a bar or two as she realized that she was no longer singing alone. Unbidden, the bronze-faced lads in blue were filling the afterdeck with a triumphant harmony of sound. Song is essential to the happiness of the American soldier and sailor.

Services over, the congregation proceeded to linger on the scene while a bright-eyed jackie walked up to the chaplain and put in a low-toned plea for more music. The upshot of the matter was that Joan remained at the piano for almost an hour, while Valerie led in the singing in a succession of home songs which one or another of the lads called out for.

"You've done those boys a world of good," was the chaplain's enthusiastic praise, as he beamingly shook hands with his pretty helpers.

"Why can't we have a sing every evening after mess?" suggested Joan eagerly. "I'd love it."

"We can and we will," was the hearty agreement.

And so it was that each evening afterward while Valerie and Joan remained on board the *Hornet,* such of its crew who were not on duty flocked to the after deck, there to spend an hour of happiness which remained a pleasant memory long after the Khaki Girls had gone on to their destined work in France.

Several days slipped by, in which Valerie and Joan had no complaint to make concerning enforced idleness. Now launched on a crusade of usefulness they were continually on the lookout for details suited to their strength and capabilities. For the most part they labored under the direction of Chaplain Ramsey, who had constituted himself as a father to the whole crew.

As workers both girls tried as well as they could to observe ship routine. They rose, ate and breakfasted at certain hours. They had their special periods for recreation. They lined up for boat drill with the crew whenever the alarm sounded. Eager to learn all they could about the ship and its workings, they prowled frequently about the sections where they were permitted to wander at will, asking interested questions and storing up the information gleaned on these preambulations.

Small wonder that the respectful admiration of Uncle Sam's sailor boys followed them wherever they chose to walk. Though they did not

know it they were proudly referred to behind their backs as "The *Hornet's* Mascots." A superstitious belief existed among the jackies that the Khaki Girls had brought luck to the ship. Exceptionally fair weather had come to stay with their arrival was pointed out by more than one lad. Not a sign of a submarine had been seen. The *Hornet* was traveling strictly according to schedule time. Only one man was in hospital. These and countless other pertinent signs seemed to point to the fact that the Khaki Girls were mascots indeed.

Amid this era of good feeling the *Hornet* drew close the danger zone, there to prove or disprove the supernatural qualities attributed to the Khaki Girls.

CHAPTER VIII

"SHIP AHOY"

ONCE the *Hornet* entered the danger zone, discipline tightened on the destroyer. Boat drill occurred more frequently and at odd hours. An extra watch was posted both day and night, not merely to keep a lookout for submarines, but also for ships in distress. The *Hornet* was now following a course where more than one merchantman had met with disaster.

The call "Ship Ahoy" was now heard oftener on the destroyer, when an occasional merchantman was sighted, ploughing her intrepid course through danger-laden seas. Intent on her own business the *Hornet* kept exclusively to herself. Now so near the voyage end Captain Beach was of the private opinion, that unless the destroyer overhauled a convoy of ships bound for France, the Khaki Girls might as well remain on board the vessel until the journey's end.

Passing through the danger zone he calculated that an armed destroyer was certainly no more open to submarine attack than any other

vessel. From now on one ship was as safe as another unless——

One dire possibility lay always in the back of the captain's mind. It had to do with the protection by the *Hornet* of other ships assailed by submarines. That would mean a fight in earnest, a consummation which he fervently desired would not come to pass.

Contrary to the Khaki Girls' earlier surmises that the destroyer was "going across to help the British chase submarines," her detail happened not to be a fighting one. It involved other important matters which had nothing to do with the running down of U-boats. Once it had been carried out her commander had orders to proceed to a point on the French coast, there to await a call that meant real danger indeed. When that hour came, it pleased him to hope that the Khaki Girls would have long since reached the Ambulance station for which they were bound.

"No more hiking about deck for us," was Joan's mournful comment on the morning after the destroyer had entered the danger zone.

On the previous evening the chums had once more received orders to stick to the cabin during their leisure hours.

"Well, I guess we can stand it," consoled Valerie philosophically. "We've been given more privileges now than we had the right to expect. I wonder if ever again in the history of this war

two girls will be allowed to sail the seas on a war ship?"

"I doubt it. Funny, isn't it, that after all the disasters we've been warned of not a single one has happened? It's been as comfy and peaceful on the *Hornet* as it was on the *Sea Gull,* Dad's little yacht."

"I'll bet we're way ahead of the *Mercedes.*" Valerie suddenly laughed outright. "The hare beat the tortoise this time."

"The captain hasn't said a word yet about where we are going to land. I asked Major La Salle yesterday. He just beamed and said 'Somewhere in France,'" admitted Joan with a half-rueful giggle. "I was sorry I asked him. I might have known I'd get no satisfaction."

"He's a true Frenchman, all smiles, but never for a minute committing himself." Valerie thus summed up the gallant major. "Well, we owe him a vote of everlasting thanks for this voyage. If it hadn't been for him we——"

"Hark!"

Joan suddenly held up her hand. Down the companionway and through the half-open door of the cabin had come the sound of men's voices raised to a shout.

"Something out of the ordinary has happened!" exclaimed Valerie as the shouting grew even louder. "Joan, do you suppose——"

"You mean they've sighted a ship—our ship —the one we hoped would never come in."

There was a slight quaver in Joan's voice.

"Oh, if only we dared go on deck!"

Valerie glanced longingly at the door as though contemplating a dash for forbidden ground.

"We can't; we mustn't. We don't know what serious thing may have happened. Don't try it, Val. We've had our orders. It wouldn't be fair to——"

"It's fair enough to look through the porthole," was Valerie's energetic cry, as her straying eyes came to rest on it. Situated above the bunk, belonging to the captain, it was easily gained.

"Just our luck to have the ship or whatever it is the shouting's about on the wrong side from this porthole," she continued, as she stepped nimbly up on her bunk to peer through the small opening.

In another instant Joan stood beside her.

"What is it?" she sharply queried. "What do you see, Val? Or don't you see anything but water and waves?"

"Look for yourself."

Valerie's tones betrayed considerable excitement, as she stepped a little to one side to give place to her chum at the porthole.

Joan looked and saw—not only "waves and water." Directly within her vision and near enough to be plainly seen was a ship. More, it was flying signals of distress.

A little to the right of it was a flock of small boats crowded with men. They were, for the most part, standing up. From their frantic wavings and gesticulations, she could guess that they were also making a good deal of noise, though she could hear no voices save those above on deck.

"It's a merchantman, I believe!" She turned to cry out to Valerie. "It must have been torpedoed by a submarine! The crew are in the boats yelling for help! Come close, Val. We can both see out at once if we manage it rightly."

Though the porthole was small, by putting their heads tight together, the chums found Joan's assertion to be correct.

In breathless silence they watched the doomed ship, expecting minutely to see her disappear beneath the waves. Thus far she was holding her own, to them appearing to show no signs of settling in the water. As neither girl had ever witnessed a ship go down they could not judge as to how soon would come the final plunge.

After what seemed a very long time, during which the men in the boat continued to make wild gestures, Joan found speech.

"What's the matter with the *Hornet,* anyway?" she demanded indignantly. "We're not going to help that ship out or we'd be nearer to it by this time. Instead, we seem to be drawing away from it!"

As it chanced, the *Hornet* was doing precisely that. Up above on deck Captain Beach and his staff were purposely holding well aloof from the distressed ship. Knowledge of Boche methods had made the commander wary of submarine traps. He did not purpose to be caught in one if he could help it.

CHAPTER IX

A MYSTIFYING CONFLICT

"BRITISH schooner *Maitland,* sir. Bound for New York. Torpedoed by U-boat two hours ago," a signal man was informing Captain Beach.

"Humph! Sounds straight enough. Signal the men in the boats for corroboration," commanded the captain tersely.

"Can't make 'em understand, sir," reported the signaller after a few moments' vain effort to establish intelligent communication between himself and the men adrift in the boats. "It doesn't look good to me, sir," he ventured. "There's something wrong about those fellows out there. Looks like they were trying to shoo us off instead of making signs for help."

"I believe your head's level then, my man," was the grim concurrence.

Turning to the officer of the day who stood beside him, the captain continued:

"The *Maitland,* if she is the *Maitland,* may

have a Boche gang aboard her who've chucked those other fellows into the water as a decoy. It looks fishy to me."

Whereupon he issued an order to the officer that soon had the gun crew in their stations on the starboard bow.

Meanwhile, at the cabin porthole, the Khaki Girls watched anxiously, divided between sympathy for the stricken ship and resentment against the captain's seemingly heartless tactics.

Their angry sputterings ended in a sudden united gasp as they continued to stare out over the water. Out of the waves something that looked like a long slender pole shot upward.

Simultaneous with its appearance the hoarse rattle of the *Hornet's* rapid-fire guns rent the air. Again and again they spoke. The slim pole was seen to wabble wildly in the air. Then it disappeared.

"Look!" screamed Joan. "Over to the left of the ship! Another submarine! It was a *trap,* Val! We got one of them. We must have. Did you see the way that periscope went under?"

"Yes!" Valerie fairly shouted the "yes." "If we don't get this one it will get us! But we'll do it. Listen to our guns!"

The *Hornet* was undoubtedly on the job. Having, as her gunners hoped, settled one U-boat, she was hard after the other. Upon the

starboard bow Uncle Sam's sailor boys were bent on proving the truth of the boast, "The American gunners are among the best in the world."

Two submarines downed in one morning and inside of a brief space of time is a feat of which any destroyer may well be proud. Judging from appearances the *Hornet* had added it to a long list of victories she had already won. The second periscope had disappeared. Appeared a trail of oily bubbles on the water, a sure indication that another shark of the deep was *hors de combat.*

What happened next was a matter of bewildering surprise to the watching Khaki Girls. In one of the open boats a man was seen to throw up his hands and pitch backward into the sea. Another lurched forward and fell among his comrades. In the other boats several more men dropped beneath a rain of bullets.

"They must be Germans! It seems terrible, though, for the *Hornet* to fire on them when they they can't defend themselves," shuddered Valerie.

As a matter of fact the *Hornet* had done nothing of the kind. The raking fire proceeded from a machine gun on board the *Maitland,* manned by a vengeful Boche gunner.

Up on deck the *Hornet's* crew now held the key to the situation. The destroyer had drawn close enough to the schooner to enable the crew

to hear the cracking of rifle shots on the *Maitland's* decks. A fight was in progress there, the meaning of which was not hard to guess.

Almost as soon as it broke out, the deadly showers of bullets which had been directed against the life boats ceased. On the *Maitland* sounds of firing continued for a little, then stopped abruptly. Men suddenly began to swarm on her decks. Directly afterward the schooner commenced to run up signal flags.

This time the *Hornet* did not delay to act. Boats were quickly manned and lowered from her davits into the sea. Very soon the Khaki Girls had fresh cause for wonderment as they saw a flotilla of the destroyer's boats making for thé schooner.

From their vantage point they watched the gallant little fleet draw up to the schooner. Presently, over her side, man after man descended into the waiting life boats. Loaded to capacity they returned to the *Hornet* and there safely deposited their human freight. Back and forth they plied unceasingly between the destroyer and the wrecked vessel, each time returning well filled until the schooner's crew had been taken off her to the last man.

Next followed the rescue of the men in the open boats. That these boats were towed to the *Hornet* showed plainly that they were without oars.

"I don't understand it at all!" finally broke

from Joan. "That schooner was acting as a submarine trap. Those men in the boats are Germans, else why did our men fire on them. We captured the ship, I suppose. But why did we fire on the little boats and not on the big one? These men must all be our prisoners. Imagine all those horrible Boches on board the *Hornet!* Ugh! It makes me sick! Quite a lot of them are wounded, too."

"Suppose the captain asks us to help care for them?"

Valerie cast a startled glance at Joan.

"I guess we'll have to do it if we *are* asked," Joan made reluctant answer. "Our Allies you know give their wounded prisoners the same care that they give their own wounded men."

"I wish somebody would kindly take a walk down here and tell us exactly what's been happening," sighed Valerie. "Up there they've evidently forgotten our existence."

But no one came. Still the chums continued to gaze out at the stretch of water deserted now save by the schooner. It was Joan who presently burst forth into fresh exclamation.

"Why, Val, that boat's settling down in the water. That means *it was torpedoed.* If it's a German craft I don't see how——"

A loud report from above cut short her puzzled surmising. A sharp cry went up from both watchers as they saw the schooner stagger, hit squarely amidships by a well-directed shot from

the destroyer. The muffled sound of an explosion rent the air. The vessel listed to starboard until her deck rail touched the waves. For a brief season she lurched and trembled, then broke apart before their very eyes and went down amidst a wild swirling of waters.

"It's all over! I'm going on deck!"

Valerie made an energetic leap from the bunk, landing on her feet beside it.

"So am I!" Joan promptly left the porthole. "We've been kept in the dark long enough. I don't care if the captain raves and tears his hair when he sees us. What's the use in having seen a fight unless you can know what it was all about."

CHAPTER X

"FIRST AID" KHAKI GIRLS

HER foot on the first step of the companionway, Valerie collided full force with a descending man. A strong arm reached out and caught her ere she tumbled back like a nine pin against Joan who was close behind her.

"I beg your—— Oh, Chaplain Ramsey! The very man we want most to see!" Valerie exclaimed in joyful recognition.

"I was just coming for you," assured the chaplain's deep, pleasant voice. "There is work for you on deck. I know you are both equal to it. Come."

Without further explanation, he turned and led the way upstairs.

Prepared though they were for the sight of the wounded, the Khaki Girls received a momentary shock with their first glance about the deck. It seemed literally strewn with bleeding, groaning men. Confusion appeared to reign,

yet it was an orderly confusion in which both officers and sailors moved about among the stricken forms, the first issuing orders, the last stolidly obeying them. Stretcher men hurried to and fro, bearing the wounded off to sick bay and returning for fresh burdens.

"Here are your First Aid girls, Lieutenant," called out the chaplain, addressing the ship's surgeon who was kneeling beside a limp, gray-faced figure.

"I can find work for them," was the hearty response as Lieutenant Osgood scrambled to his feet. "Got all your nerve with you?" he asked, looking from one to the other of the chums.

"Yes," came the unanimous, steady reply.

"Good. Go over to hospital bay as fast as you can travel. Tell Ensign Thompson that I sent you. He'll set you to work. We're getting these fellows to hospital as fast as we can. We haven't room there for half of them."

"We'll do our bit," promised Joan over her shoulder, and hurried to catch up with Valerie, who had darted away on the word "go."

Thus far neither had gleaned a word of information concerning the fight itself. Merely to witness the gruesome effects and learn that they were needed at hospital bay was sufficient to send them hustling there, minus the will to inquire into the true cause of the fray.

"Lieutenant Osgood ordered us to report for

duty," Valerie crisply informed the orderly who met them at the door.

"Very well, miss. The Ensign there'll talk to you. He won't be sorry to get some help."

The orderly indicated a white-coated medical officer who was engaged in bandaging the head of a sufferer, who kept up an incessant moaning during the operation.

"Here to help?" he demanded, as the chums stepped up beside him. "All right. One of you take those shears and cut away the sleeve from that poor fellow's blouse." He jerked his head toward the next cot below him. "Do it carefully. Shattered arm, you know."

"I'll do it."

Seizing a pair of shears from a nearby table, littered with implements of surgery, Joan promptly set to work.

"You come with me," Ensign Thompson ordered Valerie.

Leading the way to another cot, he paused. On it lay a man, whose uniform Valerie recognized in a flash. It was that of a German sailor.

"I ought to let him die," vengefully muttered the ensign in Valerie's ear.

With that one pertinent comment, he set about his examination of the Boche sufferer.

"Shot through the left shoulder," was his next remark. "Take his pulse while I cut away his blouse. Then bring me a roll of gauze and

that tall bottle of antiseptic solution on the table."

Thus occurred the initiation of the Khaki Girls into real First Aid to the wounded. Aside from the one occasion when, back in her Motor Corps days, Joan had applied prompt treatment to Arthur Drummond, the aviator, it was the chums' first opportunity to show the result of their training along these lines.

It was verging on noon when they entered sick bay. It was after six o'clock in the evening when they ceased their labors preparatory to repairing to the officers' mess for a belated dinner. It had been one of the most strenuous afternoons of work they had ever put in.

"We ought to send in a petition to the Government to commission the Khaki Girls as special aides to the *Hornet's* hospital staff, Ensign," was the tribute Lieutenant Osgood paid the chums at the close of that long, trying day.

The last wounded man having been attended to, the quartette had gathered at one end of sick bay, exceedingly weary, but well-satisfied with their afternoon's work.

"That more than compensates for the little we've been able to do."

Valerie flashed the admiring lieutenant a grateful glance. It was worth many times over the help the chums had given to thus receive such sincere appreciation.

"We were lucky to have had a chance to try

out our First Aid teachings," Joan earnestly declared. "We won't be so green when we tackle our ambulance work. It's easy enough to sit and listen to First Aid lectures, but to be able to do what you've been told must be done is another matter."

"You've taken unto yourselves a hard, dangerous job," returned the lieutenant. "The nearer you get to the firing lines the more you'll realize what it means to drive an ambulance in the war zone."

"We hope we'll be stationed near to the front," averred Joan sturdily. "I'd hate to be miles back where there wasn't much going on."

"You'll find enough 'going on' wherever you land," grimly assured Ensign Thompson. "With the Boche flyers always hanging around overhead there are no quiet spots in the war zone. Besides, they have a standing grudge against hospitals and ambulances. They try to wipe 'em off the map every time."

"Yes; Fritz has to be amused." Lieutenant Osgood spoke with bitter sarcasm. "He squeals, though, when the tables are turned on him. It's a poor rule that won't work both ways. I'm glad we've begun to drop bombs on the Fatherland. It took us a long time to make up our minds to it. Reprisal's the only thing that will ever make a dent on these Boches' thick skulls. Blow up the cathedral at Cologne and maybe they'll begin to take notice."

"Some of 'em are pretty sick of it now," commented the ensign. "That Boche in the next to the last cot on the right for instance. While I was fixing him up he whispered that he hoped the war would be over before he got well again."

"That reminds me," broke in Joan with sudden recollection, "we don't know yet what this fight was all about. We watched it from the porthole, but we couldn't straighten out the details. Before we had time to find out we were sent here. We had too much to do then to stop and question."

"I'll never again believe that women have more curiosity than men," the ensign said with a sober conviction that produced a laugh. "Do you mean that you girls are still in the dark about the fracas?"

"Yes. We know the *Hornet* got two submarines, but the rest of it is still hazy. We don't understand why the *Hornet's* crew fired on those Germans in the boats when they were helpless. It didn't seem fair even to an enemy."

Joan's little speech rang with protest against such inhuman methods. "I suppose the schooner was a German ship and those men were acting as a decoy. Still it seemed terribly heartless."

"A German ship!" almost shouted the ensign. "Not on your life! I beg your pardon.

You amazed me to slang," he apologized. "That was an English schooner, the *Maitland.* You must have noticed the difference in the way those fellows we brought in were dressed."

"We did, but we thought that the ones not in uniform were just ordinary German sailors," confessed Valerie, somewhat abashed.

"Don't ever tell 'em that," laughed the ensign. "They'd never forgive you. Now let me explain the puzzle. That schooner was the *Maitland,* an English merchantman, bound for New York. Early this morning she was attacked by a Boche raider, in cahoots with two U-boats. They crippled her just enough to suit their purpose. Had a fight with her crew and locked 'em up. Then they started out to hunt trouble.

"When they sighted the *Hornet,* the two subs hung back while the Boche crew chucked most of the real crew into the life boats and set 'em adrift without oars. They—the Fritzies ran up distress signals. That's why the fellows in the boats were making such a fuss. There wasn't a signal man among 'em so they couldn't put the *Hornet* wise except by yelling and motioning her to keep off. We didn't get their meaning. Thought they were making signs for help at first. The signals from the schooner seemed genuine, but the captain wasn't satisfied. So the *Hornet* kept her distance. The commander of one of the subs got impatient, I suppose, and

came up for action. You saw what happened then.

"While we were doing up the U-boats a wild Boche on board the *Maitland* started in with a machine gun to *strafe* the fellows in the boats. The *Hornet* never fired a shot at them. About that time the men the Fritzies had locked up broke out and rushed the Boche crew. They shot the machine gunner, killed or wounded some of the others and took the whole gang prisoners. We took about twenty-five Boche prisoners altogether. The *Maitland* was crippled enough to warrant sending her to the bottom. The subs had it planned to trail along and pick up the Boche crew if she showed signs of going down before she had a chance to lure an Allied ship to disaster."

"No wonder we couldn't straighten things out for ourselves," sighed Valerie. "What will be done with the prisoners?"

"Oh, they'll be sent to a prison camp as soon as we land. Two more days and we'll sight the French coast," informed Lieutenant Osgood. "We've made some record for ourselves this trip. Bagged two U-boats, taken twenty-five prisoners and——" He paused, then added with mischievous impressiveness, "we've carried the Khaki Girls across as members of the crew. That's an honor belonging strictly to the *Hornet*, and you can make up your mind that every man on board is strictly proud of it."

CHAPTER XI

AT THE END OF THE VOYAGE

"LOOK, Joan! France, at last!" Valerie Warde pointed to a long, low line away on the starboard, dimly glimpsed through the morning mist. France, the Mecca of the Khaki Girls' hopes, was in sight.

Standing at the deck rail, arm in arm, Valerie and Joan clung to each other in a tensity of emotion. The dangers of the sea were well nigh past. They would soon be safely landed at a little French town, patroled by United States marines. From there they would proceed at once to Paris to report at the headquarters of the American Ambulance Corps, and receive their appointment to an ambulance station behind the lines.

Major La Salle would accompany them as far as the French capital. After that they would be strictly "on their own." Had they crossed on the *Mercedes* instead of the *Hornet,* their pro-

gram would have been the same. The *Mercedes* carried a company of war workers, enlisted for various kinds of details in France. Valerie and Joan had happened to be the only two assigned to that ship who were to go over to drive ambulances.

Now that France was actually in sight, they were no longer troubling themselves about the *Mercedes*. By the time she sailed into port the Khaki Girls hoped to be settled at a station behind the lines.

Since the morning of the fight the chums had had little time to linger on deck even for a few moments. They had been constantly on duty in hospital bay where their services were in keen demand by Lieutenant Osgood.

Now watching the long, misty ribbon gradually transform itself into solid coast line, the Khaki Girls cherished a certain amount of regret that the eventful voyage was so nearly ended.

Down in the cabin their kits were packed against the moment of departure. They had eaten their last breakfast with the kindly officers whose solicitude for their welfare had been unfailing. They had made a final round of the hospital bay, saying good-bye to the wounded men who in so short a time had come to look eagerly for their smiling faces and gentle, ministering hands. Now they had nothing further

to do save remain on deck and watch France materialize out of silvery gray mist.

"It's been a wonderful voyage, hasn't it?" questioned Joan almost wistfully.

A moment of silence had ensued following Valerie's exclamation.

"Yes; we never dreamed that we'd go to France like this. I shall bless that chauffeur forever for taking us out of our way," smiled Valerie. "We didn't know that it was the beginning of Adventure, did we?"

"It started out like Misadventure, but it's ending gloriously. I hate to leave the *Hornet* now. It's grown almost homelike. That's a funny statement to make about a destroyer. It's true, just the same."

"We ought to go and bid Captain Beach goodbye now, Joan," proposed Valerie. "When it's time to land he may be busy and we won't have a chance. I wonder where we'll find him."

"He's up on the bridge. I saw him heading for there as we came on deck. We might as well stay where we are until he comes off. He'll probably walk in this direction," surmised Joan.

"Captain Beach's compliments, Miss Warde. He says will you and Miss Mason please go to the after deck at once."

Both girls whirled about at sound of a new voice. The captain's orderly had come up be-

hind them to deliver his commanding officer's message.

"Thank you. We'll report there immediately," Valerie answered.

"Why do you suppose the captain wants to see us on the after deck?" Joan questioned, as the chums briskly set off toward it.

"Ask me something easier," shrugged Valerie. "Anyway, we'll know in another minute."

On the after deck, however, a most amazing state of affairs reigned. Gaining it, the chums' eyes widened with unqualified surprise. Drawn up in mass formation, their faces beaming with good will, stood every seaman who could be spared from his duties. Off to one side stood the captain and Major La Salle, surrounded by a little group of officers.

As the Khaki Girls stepped into view, the entire assemblage came smartly to Attention and saluted.

From among the officer group, Chaplain Ramsey came forward and addressed the blushing, dumfounded recipients of unexpected military honors.

"Comrades, we have asked you to come here this morning, in order to express our gratitude and appreciation of your loyal services on board the *Hornet*. We regard your stay among us as in the nature of a great privilege which it has been our good fortune to enjoy. It is one which

we shall ever remember with pride and satisfaction. It is a matter to be regretted that we have not the power to confer on you the badges of military honor which you so truly deserve. In lieu of it, however, we have chosen for you a token of our regard which in itself must convey to you all that we cannot find words to express."

On the last word a sailor stepped from the ranks. In his hands he bore two folded silk Service flags unattached to standards. Saluting, he handed them to the chaplain and regained his place in ranks.

"In the name of the Government, the commander of the *Hornet* and her crew allow me to offer you the Service Flag of the United States."

Unfolding one of the silken emblems, Chaplain Ramsey dropped it scarf fashion across Valerie's left shoulder. Next instant Joan, too, had been thus honored.

Thus decorated, the Khaki Girls made a pretty picture as they stood side by side, cheeks pink, eyes glowing with the divine light of true patriotism.

"Three cheers for our Khaki Girls," shouted an irrepressible jackie far back in the ranks.

A volume of enthusiastic acclamation arose, as Uncle Sam's sailor boys raised lusty cheers to the "*Hornet's* Mascots."

When at last quiet again descended first the

captain then Major La Salle offered a few sincere words of commendation to the Khaki Girls. Then, in turn, one after another of the ship's official staff stepped up to Valerie and Joan, shaking them by the hand and wishing them success and safety in their chosen work.

After the officers came the men. A little impromptu reception was held there on the after deck. The company finally dispersed in orderly fashion, until only Captain Beach, Chaplain Ramsey, Lieutenant Osgood and Major La Salle remained there with the chums.

"It's the nicest and most unexpected thing that ever happened to us," Joan said softly, reverently touching the shimmering silken folds that still draped her shoulder.

"You couldn't have given us anything we'd prize more than these splendid Service Flags," Valerie declared, her tones not quite steady.

"To tell you the truth, we couldn't think of anything else to give our Khaki Girls that would show our good will toward them. We were puzzled as to what we could find on board a fighting craft like the *Hornet* that would serve as a token. Then the chaplain remembered that he had brought several of these flags with him when he came from the *Winnebago*.

"He's really a very useful person to have around," the commander continued humorously. "Right here let me say that he doesn't stand alone in that respect. I'm free to confess

that I never would have countenanced the idea that two girls could settle down on a war ship and do themselves proud as members of the crew. It was left to the Khaki Girls to prove it."

CHAPTER XII

THEIR HEARTS' DESIRE

"HOW would you like to be stationed at the American Ambulance Hospital? It is a base hospital located at Neuilly-sur-Seine. One of the finest in France."

"But it isn't anywhere near the firing line. It's only a short distance from here, isn't it?"

Joan Mason's tones vibrated with energetic protest.

Captain Bradley, head of the American Ambulance Corps, fixed keen blue eyes on the pretty questioner.

"So you are looking for a more dangerous post," he commented, a smile touching his wide, humorous mouth.

"We'd rather be attached to a field hospital."

Joan lifted her golden head with a brave little air that was vastly becoming.

"What would our duties be at Neuilly?"

It was Valerie who now took the floor.

"You would be detailed chiefly to meet the

ambulance trains that are constantly arriving at Neuilly, bearing wounded soldiers from the field hospitals."

"We've set our hearts on being stationed near a field hospital," Valerie declared with unmistakable decision. "The nearer we can go to the fighting lines the better pleased we shall be. We came over with that thought in mind. Now we'd hate to be disappointed."

"Well, it's like this. There's always room for a couple of capable woman drivers at the American Ambulance Hospital. However, I can give you what you want in the other line. Only you must be very sure that you really want it."

"But we are! We do!" exclaimed first one then the other of the chums.

"All right. Over on the western front, within plain sound and fairly close range of the guns is an ambulance unit called the 'Windsor Ambulance Corps.' It's composed, or was composed of twenty young women, all of Windsor College, U. S. A. There are only eighteen now. One of the girls went West not long ago by the shell route. Another is now in hospital for awhile. When she comes out of hospital she'll be sent home, a cripple for life. The ambulance she was driving smashed into a motor lorry.

"I'm telling you all this, not to scare you, but to show you what you may expect, at any time,

once you've committed yourself to this hazardous work. Understand?"

Captain Bradley's bushy brows met as he subjected the Khaki Girls to fresh scrutiny.

"Yes. We're not afraid," from Valerie.

"We don't mind," sturdily assured Joan.

Three days had passed since the Khaki Girls had been put ashore in the little French coast town where the *Hornet* had made port. Landing at noon the chums, accompanied by Major La Salle, had caught a train to Paris within an hour after their debarkation.

The major had seen them safely established in one of the excellent hostelries for which Paris is famed, and there bade them farewell.

Early the next morning the Khaki Girls had driven in a taxicab to the headquarters of the American Ambulance Corps. Disappointment awaited them there. Captain Bradley, the officer to whom they had been ordered to report, was briefly absent from the French capital. Unable until his return to proceed further than to examine the chums' credentials, in order to give them their registration cards, the captain's aide had instructed them to return on the following day for an interview with his chief.

First entrance into the presence of Captain Bradley with whose pictured features they had long since become familiar through the current magazines, had given the chums a slight sensation of awe. They were actually seated op-

posite the great Corps official of whose doings they had read and admired.

Their brief timidity had soon vanished, however, before the officer's bluff but kindly manner of speech. Prior to his pertinent question concerning their will to be stationed at the American Ambulance Hospital, he had asked many others, all of which related to their experience in the Liberty Motor Corps. Listening to their replies, his strong features had displayed no signs of either approval or disapproval. His eyes, however, never left off for a moment the study of the two young women seated opposite him.

"To go on with what I was telling you of the Windsor Corps," pursued the officer, "its members have a pet name of their own for it. They call themselves the "Trusty Twenty." With two girls gone, their title has become a misfit. They're anxious to keep their unit up to twenty workers. They've applied to me to help them out by sending them two young women who can measure up to their expectations. Their standard is high. So high, in fact, that I've not been able, thus far, to meet their demand."

"Do you mean, do you think——" Joan grew radiant, "that *we* would suit?"

"I'm coming to that. Yes, I have an idea that you would. Your experience in the Motor Corps has apparently been varied. You must

have shown yourselves unusually competent drivers or the Government wouldn't have sent you over, seeing you are both under the required age."

"We had had a long experience with motor cars," glibly explained Joan. "That undoubtedly counted in our favor."

Regarding the real reason why they had been especially considered as competent to make good in France both were cannily dumb. If the captain ever learned it, it would not be from their lips.

"I daresay it *helped.*"

The stress on the last word indicated that the officer held his own private view of the affair. There was a decided twinkle in his shrewd, blue eyes as he went on:

"The fact remains that you are here. Now tell me how soon can you be ready to leave for the front? You have your own ambulances here, of course."

"That's just the trouble," exclaimed Valerie. "Our ambulances were shipped long before we started. They should have arrived ahead of us, but they're not here. We've made inquiries but we can't locate them."

"Give me all the information about them and I'll look them up for you," offered the captain. "You know how uncertain shipping is, due to our persevering Fritz. Too bad you couldn't have arranged for them on the same boat with

you. By the way, what boat did you come over on?"

Joan looked at Valerie and Valerie looked at Joan. Then they both laughed outright. They had agreed before hand to say nothing at headquarters of their strange voyage unless unable to evade an explanation.

"We—that is—why, we intended to sail on the *Mercedes,*" stammered Valerie, "but well—we missed her and so——" A wave of hot color dyed her cheeks. "We came over on the *Hornet,* an American destroyer."

"What!"

It was scarcely to be wondered at that the captain looked his patent incredulity of this unbelievable statement.

"I know that sounds queer."

Valerie instantly rallied to the task of convincing the doubting officer of her veracity.

"It happened this way," she made beginning. Thereupon she entertained a most amazed official with a somewhat sketchy account of the chums' strange voyage across.

"Most astounding piece of news I ever heard," was his energetic reception of the tale. "I know Captain Beach. I'd say he was the last man in the Navy to consent to carry you ten miles on his boat, let alone bringing you across."

"Oh, he couldn't help himself. He didn't like us a bit at first, but later he was *fine* to us,"

nodded Joan. "He made us honorary members of the crew and let us help Chaplain Ramsey do welfare work on the ship. After the fight, though, we became real First Aids."

"I guess you can be trusted not to fail the Trusty Twenty," was Captain Bradley's verdict. "You've had an experience which doesn't fall to one girl in a hundred thousand. You're ready, I believe, for the next step up the war ladder.

"Even so, you are only on the threshold of real danger and hardship. You've ahead of you long hours at the wheel, rough roads to travel, indifferent food, poor accommodations, little or no recreation, and peril always at your elbow. You'll soon forget that, though. One very soon gets used to being under fire. One has no time to speculate on how long one is going to last."

"Speaking frankly, we haven't much idea of how we're going to feel when we once get actually into the war zone," confessed Valerie. "We're sure that we sha'n't be afraid. It's all going to be so new and different from anything we've ever imagined. It will probably take us a little while to grow used to seeing airplanes sailing around overhead and always hearing the guns and having shells go zipping by us."

"You'll have to get used to a good deal more than that," was the grim prophecy. "But there's no use in trying to describe to you what you'll soon see for yourself."

"Is the Windsor Corps station near the American sector of the trenches?" asked Joan eagerly.

"It's not far from the junction of the American and French sectors; a little nearer to the Sammies than the Frenchies," answered the captain with a smile.

"Would you mind advising us what to do about equipment, Captain Bradley?" petitioned Valerie. "Ours is all in New York at the Base Hospital. We thought we might be able to secure new equipment here without having to send for ours and perhaps wait a long time for it to come over. We have plenty of money so we wouldn't mind having to pay higher prices for our stuff."

"I'll give you a letter to Captain Hurst of the Red Cross headquarters here. You will have no trouble in finding the building in which it is located. He will see that you are fitted with whatever you may need. I notice you are wearing the regulation uniform for women ambulance drivers over here. You'll find that of the Windsor Corps almost the same, I believe. Once you arrive there the captain of the Corps will look out for you."

After a little further conversation with Captain Bradley the Khaki Girls rose to take their leave.

"As soon as you are re-equipped, come back here," were his final instructions. "It will

probably take you a day or two to secure everything you will require. By that time I may have news for you of your ambulances."

With an added word of thanks, Valerie and Joan said good-bye, promising to return as soon as they had completed their work of rehabilitation.

Strolling out into the sunlit street, both marveled at the changes that over three years of heart-rending war had wrought in frivolous, pleasure-loving Paris.

"It's more interesting even than it used to be," confided Valerie. "You know we came here year after year before the war began. But it has such a terrible sad, subdued kind of look now. Like a beautiful butterfly that has sugfered and afterward been given a soul."

"It does seem that way," concurred Joan. "In spite of the crowds and the uniformed men one sees at every turn, there's something queer and unreal about it all. And so many women dressed in black. Their faces, too, all have the stamp of tragedy even when they smile. I should think they ought to. Remember all the fathers and brothers and sweethearts that went away from here and never came back."

"I'm thinking about them," was the sober response. "I'm thinking, too, how much our folks have to be thankful for. Three thousand miles away from Zeppelins and long-range guns. But I'd rather be here in the midst of it than

safe in the U. S. Come on, pal. We mustn't loiter along the way. Let's hail a taxi and go out on the trail of our equipment."

"Considering the haphazard way we started across, I must say things are working out better than I had thought," commented Joan, as they strolled toward a street corner, there to hail a passing taxicab.

"We're lucky, Joan; just *plain lucky,*" declared Valerie solemnly. "No matter what queer mix-ups we get into we manage always to wriggle out better off than we were before. I think it's going to be so right along, too. It looks almost as if we really were the 'Invincible Khaki Girls.' "

CHAPTER XIII

THE CROSSROADS' PRINCESS

"PRIVATES Mason and Warde?" inquired a hearty voice, as two very dusty, very tired Khaki Girls stepped to the station platform from one of the queer little trains which Americans in France look upon as toy affairs.

"I am Private Warde. This is Private Mason." Valerie constituted herself spokesman.

"Very glad to welcome you to our Corps. I am Lieutenant Baxter."

The owner of the hearty voice, a tall, dark-eyed, broad-shouldered woman of perhaps thirty, extended her hand in turn to each of the new arrivals.

"I've been watching for you since early afternoon," she said. "I met the train before this one, thinking you might be on it. I wanted to be sure not to miss you."

"It was awfully good in you," Joan made

grateful response. "We'd hardly have known what to do or where to go by ourselves."

"Yes, it's a queer country until you get used to it. That won't take you long, though. Now come with me. We mustn't waste any time in starting for barracks. The roads are terribly muddy on account of these last two days of rainy weather. Our barrack is about twelve miles from this village. It might as well be twenty with the roads so bad. I drove over at noon in our flivver. It's not a very elegant affair, but it's the only machine the Corps owns besides our ambulances. Anyway, we can all squeeze into it, so we should worry."

With this breezy assertion, the lieutenant turned and briskly led the way across the wooden platform, around the dingy little station building. Behind it and standing at one side of a very narrow and muddy road stood the flivver, a Ford runabout, plentifully spattered with splotches of yellow mud.

"Be seated," laughed their guide, waving a hand toward the flivver. "Wait a minute, though. How shall we manage? I'll have to drive because neither of you know the way."

"Let Val sit beside you. I can sit in front on your feet," promptly proposed Joan.

"You're a good sport," approved Lieutenant Baxter, showing strong, white teeth in a genial grin.

"I hope I live up to that reputation in the

Corps," retorted Joan smilingly. "Valerie and I can't be glad enough that we're going to be with the Trusty Twenty."

"Maybe they won't want us when they know us better," commented Valerie teasingly.

"No danger of that, I guess," reassured their new acquaintance. "Captain Bradley knows better than to send us any one not up to our standard. I suppose he told you something about us, did he not?"

"Yes, he——"

"Wait until I stow your luggage away and crank up the flivver and then tell me what he said."

Thus interrupting, the lieutenant proceeded to place in the back of the car the suitcases and bags belonging to the Khaki Girls. Next she began to crank up the machine with a sturdy arm. Joan and Valerie stood beside it, watching her until she had completed this necessary operation.

"Get in." She motioned invitingly to Valerie.

Valerie instantly obeying, the lieutenant stepped into the car after her. Joan waited until they had seated themselves, then sprang nimbly after them, curling her slim length at their feet.

"Now tell me what the captain said," was the blithe command, as the flivver chugged off through the mud, spattering it on both sides of the road as it went.

"He told us a little about the Corps," began Joan. "We know you are all of Windsor College, U. S. A.; that you called yourselves the Trusty Twenty. He said your standard for membership was very high. Then he told us about the two girls you lost. That's about all he said, wasn't it, Val?"

"I don't remember anything more," Valerie responded. "We hated to ask too many questions and the captain didn't volunteer much information. I suppose he thought he'd let us find out things for ourselves."

"He is rather a clam, but a dear, just the same. He wrote Captain Seely a letter of about six lines, saying he had found two girls he thought would suit us. We hated to go outside of our own college unit, but we couldn't bear to see our Trusty Twenty reduced to eighteen and not fill up the gap."

"But suppose some one else was—well—was hurt?" questioned Joan. "Then you'd be as badly off as before."

"Sufficient unto the day, you know. We may be resigned to it, or we may try to keep up to twenty. I don't know what we'd do. Let's hope it won't happen. It nearly broke our hearts when Lina Darrell went West." The woman's strong face grew momentarily sad. "She was driving back from the trenches with a load of wounded men. A shell struck the ambulance squarely and killed her and two of the men.

The others were wounded afresh, but they're all alive to-day and recovering, so I understand."

Listening to Lieutenant Baxter, the Khaki Girls' eyes were nevertheless trained on the village through which they were passing. The road wound past quaint cottages that dotted both sides at irregular intervals.

Almost every house they passed showed more or less signs of the devastation wrought by German shells. Here and there nothing save a broken section of stone wall or a heap of rubbish and masonry indicated where a house had once stood.

In the streets or glimpsed through the open doors of the quaint French inns or *estaminets*, as they are called, occasional *poilus* were to be seen. Once they were gladdened by a hearty hail and waving of hats from a group of Khaki Boys, whom they met striding along, singing at the top of their voices.

In spite of their nearness to the destructive guns, villagers, mostly old men, women and children meandered placidly on their way through the streets. The girls saw not a few seated on the low stone steps of the cottages or walking about in their tiny yards.

"One would think these poor folks would have left here long ago," mused Joan aloud, her gaze on a little group of peasants seated on their own doorstep.

"They can't bear to leave their homes. They have taken root there and they refuse to be jerked up even by the Boches."

The lieutenant's tones were heavy with bitterness as she made this statement.

"Do you know that over seven hundred of these little French and Belgian villages have been destroyed by the Germans?" she asked. "During the first year of the war the Boches set fire to whole streets at a time. It makes one heartsick even to think of it."

As the runabout continued on through the village, Lieutenant Baxter pointed out one cottage or another. Of each she had some tragic anecdote to relate concerning the ruthlessness of an ignoble foe.

The red-roofed village left behind, the road wound between fields of grain and vegetables dotted here and there with toiling peasants, for the most part women and children. Now and then the Khaki Girls glimpsed a man among the workers, always bowed with years. The trenches had claimed all the sturdier sons of France for their own.

What amazed the chums was the never-ending stream of traffic that plied the road they were traveling. Since the beginning of the ride, the lieutenant had been kept busy steering the Ford in and out of what seemed a never-ending succession of motor vehicles.

Every village street appeared to have its full

quota of them. There was everything on wheels from whizzing motorcycles, bearing dispatch-riders, to lumbering, ungainly tractors, which puffed along before strings of humble farm wagons. Huge motor-trucks laden with supplies for the front were in constant evidence. An occasional motor-bus marked "London" or "Paris" appeared in the procession. The sight of several ambulances elicited cries of enthusiasm from Valerie and Joan. They exclaimed also, when, now and then, a smart roadster, containing staff officers dashed by them.

"This certainly beats the home traffic all hollow!" finally exclaimed Joan, her blue eyes wide with wonder of the vast Allied war machine on wheels. "And to think that every single motorcycle or wagon or automobile has something to do in the war."

"One wonders that there's enough gasoline to go round," marveled Valerie.

"There isn't, always," informed the lieutenant. "We've occasionally run short of it. It takes a lot to keep us going. We don't waste it on pleasure trips, I can tell you.

"Now we're coming to something you'll like to see," she presently added.

Hardly had she spoken when Joan called out excitedly:

"Look, Val, dear! See her? A regular Khaki Girl! Why, she's directing the traffic, I do believe!"

A few yards ahead where the road they were following crossed another highway, stood a straight, slender, khaki-clad figure engaged in an enterprise, seemingly too difficult for a woman to perform successfully.

Nevertheless, this particular young woman was undoubtedly a glittering exception. With the cool nonchalance of a traffic officer, she signalled her orders to halt or advance, displaying an ability to manage the situation which a New York traffic policeman might well have envied.

"Who is she?" Joan asked breathlessly.

"I don't know her name. She belongs to an English Auxiliary Army Corps," informed Lieutenant Baxter. "I've never been able to get a chance to talk with her. She's always too busy. She's a wonder. This is one of the most important crossroads behind the lines, so she has her hands full every minute. We always nod and smile to each other. That's the most we've been able to do, thus far."

The runabout having now advanced within the clever dictator's ken, the girl in uniform nodded brightly to Lieutenant Baxter and signalled her to proceed. In that brief moment Valerie and Joan found themselves staring at a face, the glowing beauty of which seemed strangely out of place in such rough surroundings.

"Isn't she pretty? She looks like a fairy-

tale princess with her golden hair and big blue eyes,'' was Valerie's admiring tribute.

''That's queer, I mean your saying she looks like a princess. As it happens we of the Corps have nicknamed her the 'Crossroads' Princess.' She somehow gives one the impression of the nobility.''

Though Joan had been the first to exclaim at the girl director of traffic, she had now relapsed into silence. Her brief burst of enthusiasm had been routed by one of those strange prejudices which she sometimes formed against persons on first sight. Why she should instantly dislike at first one whom she had been prepared to admire, she did not know. Not for worlds would she have then mentioned to her companions the curious wave of antagonism that had swept her as she stared at the stranger.

''She's been stationed here for a good many months. None of us have ever got beyond the bowing and smiling stage with her,'' the lieutenant was saying to Valerie. ''On duty she's always too busy to talk. We have never happened to meet her off duty. There are no Army Corps' barracks near our station. I don't know where they are located.''

''She's mighty clever,'' praised Valerie. ''I hope we get acquainted with her some day. Don't you, Joan? She could probably tell us some interesting stories about things around here. She must have seen lots of queer sights.''

"I suppose so."

Joan evaded answering her chum's question. She had no desire for an acquaintance with the "Crossroads' Princess." Nevertheless, she was destined one day to meet her and under most unexpected circumstances.

CHAPTER XIV

IN BARRACKS

"HOME at last! Welcome to our city!" exclaimed Lieutenant Baxter, as the mud-spattered flivver stopped a few yards from a fairly long, low building of unpainted wood, lighted by small, narrow-paned windows set high in its sides.

From out of its open doorway issued half a dozen uniformed girls. Down the three low steps they swarmed and rushed the flivver. Amid a babble of welcoming voices half a dozen hands shot out to meet those of the Khaki Girls as they descended from the runabout.

"Wait a minute, girls, and be properly introduced to our new members," laughed Lieutenant Baxter, forging into the center of the noisy group.

"Oh, we know their names, even if they don't know ours," assured a tall, thin girl with merry brown eyes. "But let us be elegant and precise while we may. Allow me to present myself. I

am the most distinguished member of the Trusty Twenty. I——"

"You mean extinguished," corrected a laughing voice. It belonged to a slender, trimly-built girl with soft brown hair and grayish-blue eyes.

"Nothing is farther from my meaning," asserted the tall girl with dignity. "As I was saying, I am not only distinguished but amiable; very amiable, unless rudely contradicted."

"Lead her away," begged Lieutenant Baxter. "She's hopeless."

"Not until I'm introduced," was the firm response. "I refuse to be suppressed. I am Georgia Stevens, but you may call me George."

She beamed upon Valerie and Joan with a mischievous air which made them both laugh.

"We are very glad to know you, I'm sure," smiled Valerie, Joan promptly echoing her sentiments.

"Oh, you only think so now. However, let us hope for the best," was the waggish response.

"Get away, George, and give the rest of us a chance," playfully ordered a stout, black-eyed girl with rosy cheeks. "I am Helen Travers. This is Lucy Williams." She indicated the girl with the gray-blue eyes, then rapidly named the others who had gathered about the Khaki Girls.

Introductions over, the newcomers were triumphantly escorted inside the barracks. What

Joan and Valerie saw was almost a replica of squad room in an Army cantonment. On each side of the room ranged two rows of canvas cots, ten to a side. Across one end was hung a dark green burlap curtain, which both readily guessed concealed the kitchen. On the beds neither sheets nor pillows were to be seen. They were as primitive of these accessories as the regulation Army cot.

Between each bed stood wooden racks on which hung the surplus clothing of the members of the Corps. Over most of the cots were rude shelves on which reposed books or photographs, the latter principally unframed snapshots.

"As the captain's out on duty, I'll do the honors," said Lieutenant Baxter. "Your cots are over here, side by side. As soon as you've stowed away your stuff I'll lead you to the sink. It's behind that curtain. I don't know what you expected to see, but I must tell you first and last that we have few comforts here and absolutely no luxuries."

"We didn't expect any," assured Valerie. "We don't want them. All we want is to make good in the Corps."

"That's the proper spirit. These cots will be yours. Now I'll leave you. I must put the flivver in the garage. I'll take you down there tomorrow. By the time I come back you'll probably be ready for your scrub-up."

With this the lieutenant departed to put away

the runabout, leaving the Khaki Girls briefly to their own devices. With the thoughtfulness of the well-bred, the members who had escorted them into the barracks did not intrude upon their new comrades in those first moments of getting used to barracks. Each was apparently busy with her own affairs, a courtesy which Joan and Valerie appreciated.

Laden with soap, towels and small toilet accessories, the Khaki Girls presently followed the lieutenant behind the curtain. They found the space there curtained off into two parts. The larger part being used as a kitchen, the smaller as a lavatory. In the latter were two galvanized sinks, in each of which stood two white enameled wash-basins. Beside each sink stood two large enameled pitchers.

"We have to carry all the water we use from a spring not far from barracks," explained the lieutenant. "It's rather inconvenient, but it can't be helped. Last winter the spring was frozen most of the time. We had to melt snow. Sometimes we had no water for two or three days running, except what we carried in our canteens for drinking. We could always get that at the field hospital."

"It's ever so much harder to get along in winter, isn't it?" asked Joan.

"Oh, yes. We had our own troubles last winter. Half the time our stoves wouldn't go. We had a hard siege during the very cold weather.

Getting up in the dark and making fires that won't burn is no fun. It's all in the day's work, though. Of course, we grumble a little now and then, but not one of us wants to be any place other than here at the front.

"Now I must go and see what the prospects for supper are. We have the dearest old French peasant for cook!" the lieutenant declared with enthusiasm. "Her name is Marcelle. She lives in a little house not far from here. There's quite a story connected with it. I'll tell you about it some time. Better still I'll let her tell you. If she likes you she will. If she doesn't she won't. She's very queer about that. Has marked likes and dislikes."

"Marcelle and I have a bond in common," remarked Joan in a low tone after the lieutenant had disappeared. Through the curtain the latter's voice could be heard in the kitchen division addressing some one, presumably Marcelle.

"What's that?"

Her blouse removed, Valerie was engaged in an energetic laving of face and throat. In consequence she had not caught the drift of Joan's low-voiced comment.

"I said that Marcelle and I——" Joan paused in the unbuttoning of her blouse and became momentarily silent.

"Well, *what* did you say?" asked Valerie, smiling at the preoccupied little girl.

"I was just thinking about that girl we saw

at the crossroads," resumed Joan irrelevantly. "I didn't intend to tell you. I know you'll just laugh, but—well—I didn't like her. She reminded me somehow of that woman I had to search that time on board the *Netherlands*. I suppose that's why I didn't admire her. I couldn't think at first what it was about her that jarred on me. After a while, long after we passed her, it came to me."

"You're a dear goose," railed Valerie. "You mustn't let those fatal first impressions of yours take possession of you. That girl we saw to-day is a wonder. It's not her fault if she makes you think of your German woman spy. Come on, now. Hurry up and get washed. I want to get out and get better acquainted with the gang."

Thus adjured, Joan busied herself with her toilet and was soon ready to accompany Valerie to the other room.

Returning to it they spied Lieutenant Baxter in close conversation with a newcomer whom they readily surmised to be Captain Seely. Of medium height, her strong, plain face was stamped with character. Her steady, dark eyes gave hint of unflinching purpose, while her square shoulders looked capable of bearing the burden of Corps responsibility. Her whole make-up was such as would inspire not only respect but confidence.

Formally introduced to her by the lieutenant,

she greeted the new additions to her fold with a courtesy, faintly tinged with reserve. She was not nearly so cordial as had been Captain Bartram, their former chief, on first meeting. Both girls realized that she was an entirely different sort of person, yet both were prepared to like her.

"I shall have a few moments to talk to you before supper," she said, after she had questioned them briefly regarding their journey. "After dark to-night we have an especially heavy trench detail that will keep most of us busy until dawn to-morrow morning. You know we do such work at night under cover of the darkness. Let me see, you were to have the two cots war left vacant for us. Very well, suppose we sit down on them and get acquainted. We have no such luxuries as chairs," she added with a faint smile.

Seated on Joan's cot opposite Joan and Valerie, who occupied the cot belonging to the latter, Captain Seely crisply put them through a third degree regarding their previous work in the Motor Corps. She also asked to see their credentials and went carefully over these before returning them.

"Under age, but specially appointed by the U. S. Government," she commented, as she handed them back. "That sounds good. You must understand, however, that I intend to write Captain Bartram about you," she added

frankly. "Not because I distrust either of you, but simply because I choose to do so."

"Our unit is a little different from all the others. We are as you might say, a close corporation. Lieutenant Baxter and I were both of Windsor College faculty. This is a volunteer organization which we perfected ourselves. Eighteen of our girls were students at Windsor. All understood motor cars and were skilled drivers and mechanicians. Together we took a course in ambulance work, then offered our services to the Government to drive in France. We passed the necessary tests, were accepted, and have been at the front for almost a year.

"We work in conjunction with the men of Field Hospital Number 28. As far as we can, we do the same work as the men of the ambulance corps. Although we sometimes have stretcher men with us on our trench details, often two or three of us ride in one ambulance and handle the work among us. Sometimes we go out with but one to each ambulance. It all depends on circumstances."

"We've had good practice in stretcher and first-aid work," volunteered Joan. "We're terribly anxious now to try it out. I think it's simply great in you to accept us in a private corps like this, even for a try-out. We sha'n't expect you to keep us on a minute if we don't measure up to your standard."

"That is a very sensible statement," re-

turned the captain. "I shall give you every possible chance, naturally. Should you fail to make good then I don't want you. That's bald, but plain truth is always best from the start."

"If we couldn't make good we'd be the first to know it," Valerie gravely asserted. "We'd resign from the Corps at once and find something over here that we could do."

"We'll trust it won't come to that." The captain's tones were kindly reassuring. "Now about rules and regulations. We follow those of the American Army as closely as we can. Reveille with us is at six in summer. In winter, six-thirty. That is, of course, when our work is done by daylight. We do a good deal of driving by day, conveying wounded soldiers from the field hospital to ambulance trains. Sometimes we have to make fast trips to the base hospitals. Trench details we divide among us. So many girls to a detail on quiet nights. When the fighting has been hard we send extra ambulances."

"How long will it be before we can be entrusted to do such work?" asked Valerie thoughtfully. "It will take us a while at least to become familiar with our territory. Our ambulances have arrived in France and are on the way here."

"Your best plan will be to go out with the other girls on their details. In a week's time you ought to be competent to travel about by

yourselves. Many times you will have company, however. I shall send ten ambulances to the trenches to-night. You must have noticed that the German guns have been very busy today. That means work for us."

"We're getting used to the sound of them," smiled Valerie. "We began hearing them before we left the train. Are we out of range of them here?"

"Oh, no. We were once, but not now. The armies have gradually shifted positions until we are quite open to stray shells. We haven't been bothered with any as yet. It would not amaze me, though, if I were to return here one day and find nothing but a heap of débris instead of this barrack. Bombs out of a clear sky are as frequent as shells from the Boche batteries. It's six of one and half a dozen of the other."

While the captain conversed with the Khaki Girls the absent members of the Corps began to arrive singly or by twos and threes. They were a healthy, happy lot, browned and sturdy from their outdoor work. They appeared delighted to welcome the chums and exhibited the frank friendliness which girls of the higher walks of life manifest toward one another.

Fourteen of the Corps were present at supper. It was eaten in the kitchen, the girls sitting on a wooden bench built into the wall and extending around three sides of the room. All

used the mess kits of the Army, consisting of a meat can and cover, metal drinking cup, knife, fork and spoon.

Marcelle, a rugged, white-haired woman with twinkling black eyes, stood by a small range and served each in turn with her portion of food. Supper that night consisted of beef stew, canned corn, black bread, coffee and apple sauce. It was a plain meal, but the excellence of the cooking was not to be denied. The Khaki Girls were very hungry and congratulated themselves on being served with so satisfying a repast.

Supper over the girls gathered in the squad room for a brief period of relaxation before the strenuous duties of the night began. Just at dark the ten selected for the trench detail prepared in business-like fashion to depart. Not far from barracks their ambulances awaited them in a make-shift garage which was merely an open shed.

Standing in the doorway Valerie and Joan watched them wistfully out of sight around the curve of a little hill. In the distance the thunder of the guns assailed their ears.

"I wish we were going, too," sighed Joan.

"So do I. Never mind, our turn will come. It took us a long while to get this far. But we're here, Joan, and the biggest half of the battle is won. Now the rest will be easy."

CHAPTER XV

DETAILED FOR TRENCH DUTY

"I CAN'T get 'em up! I can't get 'em up!" musically complained the bugle, unmindful of the fact that its first clarion note had roused twenty sleeping girls into activity.

Joan Mason sat up with a jerk on her narrow canvas cot, her blue eyes blinking sleepily at the golden streams of sunshine pouring down upon her from the narrow-paned barrack windows.

Reaching over to the next cot, on which Valerie was in the act of raising herself to a sitting posture, Joan touched her lightly on the arm.

"To-day's the day, Val. I mean, to-night's the night. I can hardly wait for night to come. Our first detail to the trenches! Think of it! Come on. Let's hurry and get washed ahead of the others. We want to get busy at the garage as soon as we can."

For two weeks the Khaki Girls had been active members of the Windsor Ambulance Corps. Their activities, however, had thus far consisted in "learning the ropes." This in itself was an undertaking of some magnitude. It takes time and dogged perseverance to learn the topography of a foreign land, particularly if that land happens to be turned upside down by war.

With every road for miles around showing the same daily processions of marching troops and war paraphernalia on wheels, small wonder that the Khaki Girls' sense of direction was at first bewildered. Gradually, out of what first seemed chaos, the familiar slowly but surely developed. A curiously formed shell crater, a half-burnt barn, a jagged bit of stone wall, all that remained of a peasant's home, these soon became land marks, too clearly identified to be forgotten.

Five days after the chums reached barracks their ambulances arrived and were duly established in the Corps' primitive garage. Though the Khaki Girls had made daily trips about the section in the ambulances of their comrades, they burned to go out "on their own."

The day after the machines arrived the two devoted to going over them minutely, so as to have all in readiness when the longed-for hour should come. It did not fall to them, however, to initiate their ambulances. That same night a

hurry call from the trenches for every available machine saw the chums' ambulances chug away driven by two hospital men. Both had begged soulfully to be taken along, but Captain Seely had refused consent.

"Not yet," she had demurred. "You need another week's practice at day work before you are ready for night details. I want you to know every stick and stone of this locality. Night driving requires it. True you will not go to the trenches alone, but on the return trip you are quite likely to become separated from the others. Have patience. Your turn will come soon enough."

With this kindly but firm refusal the girls were obliged to be content. However, everything comes to those who wait. Joan and Valerie awoke to greet the morning sun, full of blissful anticipation over the good word that had come to them on the previous evening.

"You are to go with the trench detail tomorrow night," was the glorious news the captain had imparted to them.

"Go over your machines carefully," she advised. "They must be in A-Number-One condition. This detail will be more in the line of a practice trip for you. You will, no doubt, have a wounded man or so entrusted to your care. You know it has been very quiet down there for the past three days. I daresay there have been few casualties."

It was the captain's custom, even in lulls during the fighting, to send each evening several ambulances to the trenches. These never returned empty, yet after a quiet day they were not apt to be loaded to capacity.

"It's going to be rather a tame detail, I guess," remarked Valerie, as the two repaired to the sink for their morning ablutions.

"I'm glad, for the sake of the boys in the trenches that it *has* been quiet lately. Wouldn't it be queer, Val, if, just about the time *we* started, a heavy bombardment of our lines would begin?"

"It wouldn't surprise me. You know the old saying, 'There's always a calm before a storm.' Still, not a thing may happen. The girls say that it's often been quiet like this for a week at a stretch in the trenches."

"That was when our boys first took over this sector, though. Georgia Stevens told me last night that for the past two months the fighting has been going on steadily until within these last three days. The Boches are continually coming over on trench raids. They want to take American prisoners so as to find out, if they can, about our troops and their plans."

"Our boys would never tell them anything. They'd stand any amount of torture, but they'd never betray their country," boasted Valerie with fine loyalty.

"Yes; they'd be true blue to the last gasp,"

warmly agreed Joan. "I wish we could make a trip to the trenches to-day, just to get our bearings."

"You might as well wish for the moon. Captain Seely wouldn't hear to such a thing. It would be exposing ourselves needlessly to danger. I don't mind saying that I'd like to do it, just the same."

"We might have to some day in an emergency," speculated Joan hopefully.

"Might have to do what?" demanded Georgia Stevens, who had come up in time to catch Joan's latest words.

"Oh, hello, George! We beat you to the sink. We stole a march on the girls. We're all through making ourselves beautiful before they've even started."

"I saw you two hot-footing it for the lavatory like a couple of early birds. Thought I'd fall in line. You're going out to the trenches to-night, aren't you? I'm going, too, provided I can get my trench buggy in shape. Something's gone wrong with its delikite anatomy. Don't know just what it is yet. I'm a better driver than mechanician. 'Let George do it!' is a good slogan but not when it comes to repairing a car that won't repair."

"Maybe I can help you," offered Joan generously. "I've done a lot of repair work. I love to do it."

"Thanking you in advance for any courtesy

you may deign to bestow upon me, I remain, Yours gratefully," recited Georgia with an impish grin.

The arrival of half a dozen girls in the little lavatory filled it to overflowing. Valerie and Joan promptly removed themselves to the squad room.

Breakfast over the chums and Georgia set off together for the not far distant garage. It stood at the foot of a gently sloping meadow, partially surrounded by trees and bushes.

Long, low, and painted leaf green, it blended so well with the surrounding greenery as to hide it from enemy observation planes.

"Have you used this garage right from the start?" Valerie asked Georgia as the trio approached it.

"No. Last winter we kept our ambulances in a place that the French had used as a supply depot. One day a Boche plane came along and bombed it. The funny part of it was," laughed Georgia, "that not a single ambulance happened to be there when it went up in smoke. We were all out on details."

"That was lucky," commented Joan.

"Lucky! It was positively providential!" exclaimed Georgia. "After that we had to find cover wherever we could around here. Then a lot of American engineers happened along. They were repairing roads. They were splendid boys. When they heard what had happened

to us, they went to work and built this shed for our machines. It was painted a dull brown at first and in winter it looked like the rest of the landscape. As soon as the leaves came out we went to work and painted it green. Rather a good job we did, too. Some camouflage! What? It must look like a part of the landscape, for the Boches have certainly passed it by."

"Better touch wood," was Valerie's laughing advice.

"Wait till I get to the shed and I will," smiled Georgia. "I'm not superstitious, though. I guess our camouflaged garage is safe as anything else in this territory. Nothing's safe here. It's a poor place for a coward."

By the time they entered the shed she had forgotten Valerie's jesting advice. Attired in overalls, which they had put on at the barrack, the three girls went to work.

"I'll go over my ambulance first. If it's O. K. then I'll be free to help you," Joan said to Georgia.

"All right. I'm going to crawl under my car first thing and see if I can locate the trouble," returned Georgia. "If I can't then I'll call on you, Joan."

Valerie and Joan began a careful inspection of their ambulances, which presently resulted in the joint announcement O. K. from both. Whereupon they turned to and lent willing aid to their comrade, who was still making frantic

search for the defective spot in the big white machine.

"Let me crawl under it, George," proposed Joan. "I have an idea that——"

Whatever may have been Joan's idea regarding the recalcitrant ambulance, it suddenly took flight. She was dimly conscious that the solid ground had begun to rock under her feet. She was flung face downward on the dirt floor of the shed with a force that jarred every bone in her body. She received a fleeting impression that the end of the world had come, and lay still, hardly daring to breathe.

CHAPTER XVI

A BOCHE MEMENTO

"WHAT—what—was it?"

Joan became dreamily aware that the gasping tones were Valerie's. Very slowly she lifted her head. Directly in front of her was Georgia's ambulance, under which she had intended to crawl. More slowly yet she cast a slow glance around, at the same time bracing her hands on the ground. Raised to a sitting posture, she saw Valerie uncertainly endeavoring to scramble to her feet. As for Georgia, where was she?

"George, oh, George, where are you?" quavered Joan.

"Here I am."

Very pale, but smiling, nevertheless, Georgia appeared around the corner of an ambulance, considerably farther down the shed.

"It knocked me flat, but you can't keep a good scout down. I arose in my might and went out to take observation. There's a fine large sec-

tion of Mother Earth ripped up in front of the shed. A little nearer, and good night shed."

"It was a shell, I suppose," Valerie said dully.

Now on her feet she was staring about her in dazed fashion.

"No, it was a bomb. A Boche flyer tried to wipe us off the map. After my boasting, of course he had to go and see through our lovely camouflage," sputtered Georgia. "We'll never be safe again unless—— Come on out quickly."

Without stopping to explain, Georgia ran from the shed, apparently none the worse for the sudden shaking-up she had received. Valerie and Joan followed her, but with less haste. Both were feeling a trifle weak and wobbly.

"Look!" screamed Georgia, pointing upward and toward the west. "Our planes are after the Hun. I hope they down him!"

Staring upward, the Khaki Girls saw three black specks traveling due westward. One speck, evidently the Boche plane, was in the lead. The other two appeared to be rapidly gaining upon it.

"He's trying to make his own lines!" Georgia cried out excitedly. "He'll never do it! Our planes are going to down him! Watch and you'll see for yourself."

Valerie and Joan were, indeed, watching with all their might. Heads thrown back, eyes fixed

on the three distant gyrating specks, it became hard for them to distinguish which one of the three was the enemy airplane. From the way in which the trio of specks was behaving, they did not doubt that a fierce aerial battle was being waged up there in the sunlit sky.

In what seemed to them an incredibly brief lapse of time, they saw one of the black dots dip like a kite in the wind, then shoot down and on down toward the earth. Lower and lower it plunged until it disappeared behind a western hilltop.

"That Hun'll never come back to finish our beloved shed!" shouted Georgia exultantly.

"How do you know it was the German plane that went down?" Joan asked, turning her tired eyes on Georgia, who was still gazing soulfully in the direction of the fight.

"Use your eyes, my child," replied Georgia without turning her head. "See our two specks coming back, as chummy as can be. Allied planes; French probably. There's a French escadrille not many miles from here. I can rest easy now, until the next Boche happens to spot our lair."

Though this was but one of many airplane fights the chums had witnessed since their advent into the Windsor Corps, it impressed them more deeply because of their near escape from death at the hands of the German flyer who had so shortly afterward received his own quietus.

In consequence neither had much to say as, with Georgia, they returned to the shed.

Noting their silence, Georgia asked rather mischievously: "You're not going to take a little thing like an ordinary, everyday Boche memento seriously, are you?"

"We're not scared, if that's what you mean," smiled Joan. "It would have been a shame, though, to get blown to smithereens before we had our chance to go to the trenches."

"That's just what I was thinking," Valerie admitted. "To be strictly Irish in speech: if that bomb had finished me I should have been terribly disappointed."

This Irish bull created a round of giggles that served to drive away the grim thought of their near obliteration. Without further ado the trio set to work overhauling Georgia's ambulance. Eventually they located the difficulty, which Joan attacked with a will and presently conquered.

"You're a wonder," Georgia declared in warm admiration of Joan's skill. "It would have taken me all day to do what you've done in less than an hour."

"Joan's a better mechanician than I," avowed Valerie.

"And Val's a better driver than I," retorted Joan.

"Honors are even then. You both deserve to be decorated," asserted Georgia gaily. "I

have a Boche helmet and a Fritzie gas mask among my traps. You may take your choice. Both are cherished souvenirs. But I am nothing if not grateful."

"No, thank you," declined Joan, laughing.

"I couldn't bear to deprive you of such treasures," jeered Valerie. "You might explain, though, how you happen to be cherishing them so fondly."

"Oh, they're just curiosities. I—never mind about them. I—spoke of them before I thought."

For some reason, best known to herself, Georgia had turned very red as she made this vague explanation.

"You didn't take me seriously, I hope," Valerie said quickly. She wondered if her seemingly satirical comment had been misconstrued as hateful rather than merely playful.

"I knew you were only teasing," nodded Georgia. "It's like this. There's a story attached to those Hun relics, but I'd rather not be the one to tell it to you. Ask any of the girls. They love to tell it."

"But why won't you tell us?" quizzed Joan, her curiosity fully aroused.

"Why? Because it happened to me. It would be pure swank, as the English say, for me to tell it. I hate swank."

"That settles it. You've got to tell us. Swank or not, we'd rather hear it from you,"

persisted Joan, who now had a faint inkling of the nature of the tale.

"All right, I will; for a reason of my own, which you'll hear later. Sort of a moral, you know."

"Go ahead then," urged Joan.

"Well, to begin with, I captured that helmet and gas mask myself," announced Georgia grimly. "Maybe you'll be a tiny bit shocked when I tell you that I had to kill a Hun to do it."

"Oh, fine!" approved bloodthirsty Valerie.

"It was either his life or a prison camp for me," Georgia said tersely. "There's a point away up near the end of the American sector where No Man's Land is only a few yards wide. One night last winter I was sent to a dressing station there for some wounded men. I missed the end of the communication trench somehow and got lost. The first thing I knew I ran straight into a Boche patrol of six men.

"They swarmed around the ambulance but I managed to speed up with a jerk that knocked them away from it. Only one hung on. He climbed up to the seat, so I pulled my revolver and shot him. He fell half out of the ambulance and I let him hang there while I put on speed and got away. I wasn't sure where I was going but I went and bumped right into the entrance to the com. trench.

"The First Aid boys took my Boche off the

ambulance. He was dead, thank goodness. I didn't look at him. I couldn't. I felt queer about having killed even a Hun. The boys made a lot of fuss over me, but I couldn't say a word hardly. I was glad I killed him, but sorry I had to do it. It doesn't *seem* just right for women to kill, even in self-defense. It *is* right, though.

"I got my two wounded men and took them to the field hospital. Next day I found the gas mask and the helmet in the ambulance. The boys had put them there for me without saying a word. So I kept them. I didn't say a word to the girls, but the boys at the dressing station told on me.

"That's the story. The moral is: 'The only good Hun is a dead Hun.' If you're ever caught by any of them while you're driving, shoot quickly, and shoot to kill. They are merciless. Remember that."

"Captain Bartram told us the same thing," declared Valerie. "We had a fight with a couple Germans one night back home. You've told us your story, so I guess it's fair to return it with ours."

Briefly Valerie recounted the incidents of that memorable night when she and Joan had sturdily defended themselves against the Hoffmann brothers.

"Why I read about you in the newspapers," was Georgia's wondering cry. "My mother

sends them to me regularly. And you two are the 'Invincible Khaki Girls.' You quiet young clams. And to think you belong to our gang. Won't you please let me tell the girls?"

"No, no!" came from Valerie and Joan in protesting chorus.

"We don't want it known," explained Joan. "We want to make good over here strictly on our own merits. It isn't what we've done that counts, it's what we're going to do and finally accomplish. We don't want to have to live up to past performances. We'd rather be just nonenities until we can show that we're something bigger than that."

CHAPTER XVII

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS

AT nine o'clock, under cover of sheltering darkness one ambulance after another, to the number of five, slipped away toward the trenches.

Captain Seely headed the detail. Behind her came Valerie, careful to keep her ambulance the required number of yards to the rear of the captain's car. Georgia Stevens followed her. Then came Joan, while Lieutenant Baxter brought up the rear.

Before going out on the stealthy night errand of mercy the Khaki Girls had been duly warned against showing of lights or the making of unnecessary noise.

"Steal along as quietly as you possibly can," Captain Seely directed them a few minutes before the start. "Part of the way the road is screened. You are not half so likely to be seen as heard. The enemy has sharp ears. Any carelessness on your part is apt to be rewarded

by a hail of shells dropping on your heads. Don't show yourselves in the open near a first-aid post. It's positive suicide. As soon as your ambulances are loaded, get on your way with all speed. Should a bombardment begin while your machines are being loaded, duck for cover. You are much more useful alive than dead. Remember that."

Leaning over the wheel, eyes endeavoring to pierce the blackness ahead, ears alertly trained to catch the faint chugging sound made by the ambulance in advance, Joan was filled with a sense of quiet happiness. It was no dream. It was reality at last. She, Joan Mason, was on her way to the trenches to pick up wounded soldiers.

Owing to the lull in hostilities that day, no hospital men accompanied the ambulances. At the first-aid post were plenty of stretcher bearers to attend to the placing of the wounded in ambulances. Undoubtedly during the day a few Sammies had been laid low either by Hun sharpshooters, stray shells, or by accidents occurring within the American lines. There were always a certain amount of casualties from this latter cause.

Though this was the first time she had traveled the road trenchwards, Joan had made a careful study of it from a map furnished her by Captain Seely. She had fixed every turn of the narrow highway firmly in her mind. Dark as it

now was she realized with a little thrill that her painstaking study had not been in vain. She believed that, given the opportunity, she could have successfully reached the objective point alone.

Traveling at a fair rate of speed, considering the enveloping darkness, the big machines soon ate up the few miles between the starting-point and the trenches. The first-aid dugout lay at the entrance to a communication trench. It was not more than three hundred yards away from the firing line.

Two hundred yards back from the dugout, at a point in the road screened to a height sufficient to protect the machines from observation, the halt was made. As they had drawn nearer to the firing line they had been repeatedly challenged by outpost guards. Now another sentry challenged each driver as she came up, then regulated the distance apart at which each ambulance should stand.

Joan heaved a little sigh of satisfaction as her hands dropped momentarily from the wheel. Her eyes grown accustomed to the blackness, she could just distinguish the top of the screen from the murk of the night itself. Ahead all was black, unrelieved by even shifting shadow.

A deep stillness lay over all. It seemed hard to believe that not far below her were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fighters. Not even

a footfall was to be heard. The occasional rustle of some lucky leaf that had escaped the fury of shell fire was all the sound that came to her ears for a little.

Once only she started slightly when a star shell sent up by the Germans suddenly illuminated the night with silvery radiance. She guessed that the spot over which it hung must be No Man's Land. It was certainly a considerable distance from where she sat. Presently another and still another went up. Then the thick darkness closed down again, seeming even more impenetrable by contrast to the evanescent white light.

Of a sudden her keen ears caught a new sound. It was the subdued tramp of feet. Nearer it came to the ambulance. Leaning over the side, Joan made out the shadowy forms carrying a stretcher. They passed by her silently, bound for the captain's ambulance. Behind them came two more similarly burdened.

Soon two others had halted beside Joan's ambulance. They also were burdened with a stretcher.

"Good evening, Miss."

One of them was addressing Joan in a whisper.

"Good evening," she whispered back. "What can I do to help you?"

"Turn this flashlight on the inside of the ambulance while we put this poor guy in," was

the prompt response. "Press this spring for the light when I say, 'O. K.' "

Placing the flashlight in the hand Joan reached out he guided her fingers until they were on the spring.

"Get it?" he asked, still whispering.

"Yes."

"Be sure you have it under cover before you light up," he warned. "Can't be too careful, you know."

"I'll be sure."

Turning in the seat, Joan watched the process of placing the wounded man in the ambulance. Her first *blessé,* as the French term the wounded. By the aid of the flashlight she could see him quite plainly. His head was bandaged and his right arm in splints. As the light rays flowed over him he opened his eyes and blinked feebly. Muttering unintelligibly he closed them again.

Joan's own eyes darkened with pity as she looked at the pallid, suffering face.

"Will he die?" she asked the stretcher bearer who had handed her the flashlight.

"No, Miss. I don't think so. He has a bad head there, but they'll fix him up all right when he gets to the field hospital. You can down the light now. We're going back after another guy."

The "guy" referred to proved to be a young sergeant who had a bullet wound in the chest.

Joan's eyes widened in amazement as she put the flashlight into play. Between the sergeant's lips was a cigarette. Injured though he was, he appeared to be deriving the utmost satisfaction from his smoke. He even smiled as he saw Joan's wondering look.

"I'm not dead yet," he said in low, cheery tones. "Not too dead to smoke, anyway. "I'll be back here again in a week or so. I've just got to get another whack at the Huns."

"You're splendid—I think," Joan sweetly assured the lad. "I hope you get well in a hurry. Only when you come back next time I hope you'll be luckier."

"Oh, I guess I'll stick around for a while," was his optimistic prediction.

The stretcher men having already gone for another *blessé*, she shut off the light and waited, wondering if the third man would be the last she was to take on as a load. When the bearers arrived with him she could not repress a shudder. He was minus a leg and an arm and groaning horribly.

"Drive as easy as you can, Miss, but get over the ground," muttered the stretcher man in an undertone. "The last one there's going West, I'm afraid. He's lost too much blood. He was brought in after dark from No Man's Land. He'd been there since yesterday, he said, lying in a shell crater."

"Will you please see if Captain Seely is

ready to start?" requested Joan. "I'm to follow her. This is my first trench detail. I'm not quite sure of my bearings, so I don't want to lose track of her."

"I'll see, Miss."

The man was briefly lost in the night, then returned with the cheering information:

"She's just ready to go. Drive right along. This road makes a loop around a little grove and puts you on the home track. It has to be that way, 'cause there's no room for a turn."

Five minutes and Joan had started the ambulance toward the loop. She had just turned the curve when the silence of the night was shattered by an ear-splitting roar. It was as though all Pandemonium had been suddenly let loose. The little grove she was skirting was lighted by a blinding red glare. Followed the terrific detonation of an exploding high-power shell.

"They're at it again! Duck for cover, Miss! Don't mind us!"

It was the wounded sergeant's voice raised to an imploring scream.

For the fraction of a second Joan hesitated, remembering Captain Seely's admonition had been the same as the sergeant's.

"I sha'n't do it," she called out defiantly. "I'm going to keep on going until I find some place where we can take to cover, ambulance and all."

CHAPTER XVIII

UNDER FIRE

SETTING her teeth, Joan drove the ambulance forward. Thanks to bursting shells, which continued to explode, some of them uncomfortably close to the ambulance, she could see her way quite plainly.

"If I can only get away from this section, I can make the hospital. I know I can," she muttered determinedly.

What had happened to the rest of the detail was the frantic thought that crossed her mind? She dismissed it instantly. She must think only of her own situation. She had been entrusted with the care of three wounded men. Their welfare must now be her sole consideration.

Putting on all the speed she dared under the circumstances, Joan valiantly gripped the wheel. Her first feeling of panic had vanished the instant she realized that she was under fire. The flash and roar of the opening bombardment had dismayed her but briefly. She

was now cool and collected. She would race Death and beat him.

On and ever on she drove, expecting every moment would be her last. She was not sure now that she was heading in the direction of the field hospital. She only knew that she was drawing steadily away from the firing line. Once a shrapnel shell burst so close to her that some of its fragments clattered on the roof of the ambulance. Again the car just missed leaving the road and landing in a ditch.

She had long since left the camouflaged road behind her and was now racing along through more open country. With a thankful heart she noted that the shells were coming with less frequency. It looked as if she was now either above or below the portion of the sector which was being bombarded by the Germans.

"Maybe I'm out of range now," she reflected, half aloud. "I——"

Came an ominous whining sound, followed by the peculiar scream of exploding shrapnel. From the top of the car sounded a sharp report. The ground seemed to shake under the ambulance. It lurched and quivered like a living thing. Clinging doggedly to the wheel, Joan thought the end had come.

Next instant she began to wake up to the fact that the machine was still on the road and moving. Though it rocked from side to side, she was aware that it was due to her own un-

steady driving rather than the fault of the ambulance itself.

It had been hit by the shell, else why had it staggered. It was queer. She had supposed that if a shell really struck the ambulance it would wipe it out of existence, yet it was still here and so was she. But what of the three wounded men?

Much as she would have liked to turn and look into the body of the ambulance she dared not take her eyes from the road ahead. She did manage to steal a glance at her illuminated wrist watch. Why it was not yet eleven o'clock! She could hardly believe it. It seemed an age since she had started out with the others. Where were they? Where was Val?

A little sob rose in Joan's throat at thought of her beloved chum.

"I mustn't think of her now!" she told herself with stern resolution. "Oh, I hope I haven't lost my way. It would be terrible with that one man so near death. Maybe he's dead now."

Spurred to fresh effort by this dire thought, Joan peered anxiously into the black cloak of night. From the region she had quitted she could hear the incessant thunder of artillery. It sounded even louder than before, leading her to believe the American artillery had opened a retaliating fire.

"What a goose I am," she said with sudden

asperity. "I'll stop the car and get down for a minute. Maybe I can tell where I am by the flashes over there."

"Oh, Miss," called a faint voice from within the ambulance as it came to a dead stop. "You're a dandy, Miss. You brought us through safe."

"You're not at hospital yet by any means," replied Joan ruefully, hurrying to the rear of the car and opening the door. "I don't know where I am. I'm trying to find out by the flashes from the guns. We're away out of range of them, I think. I don't know whether we're above or below the trenches. If we're above we're away off our course."

"Give me a hand. Lift me up. I'm no dead one. Hold me up and I can put you straight."

To do this without disturbing the other men in the ambulance was no easy task. Nevertheless, Joan managed finally to raise the gritty sergeant to a position where he could look out from the wide-open door.

"You're below 'em," he announced finally. "I don't know how far. Ten miles, maybe. Keep on going till you strike a viliage. They're thick around here. Then ask somebody. I'm —I'm—getting groggy, Miss. Let me down again."

This Joan did, hastily but with due care. Gently shutting the door she climbed back up to the driver's seat and started on.

Presently, coming to a turn in the road, she uttered a low cry of joy. Just off it she made out the shadowy bulk of a building. Now she knew where she was. She had long since marked the peculiar fashion in which this very house was set. From a distance and in daylight it looked as if it stood out on the road itself.

She knew that other houses lay beyond it. They formed the remains of a village that had been partially destroyed by the Germans in a previous drive.

Less than two miles south of it lay the barracks and a little farther on, oh, joy! the field hospital.

Exultant over her timely discovery, Joan rounded the curve. Soon she was passing through the ruined village. All was silent there. Not a light showed in any of the still habitable cottages she passed. The persecuted French peasant has learned his lesson well. He lights no beacons whereby hostile airplanes may hunt him out and destroy him.

Coming at last to the field hospital Joan felt herself suddenly drained of strength as she essayed to climb down from the driver's seat. As her feet touched earth she stood still for a moment, fighting back the wave of dizziness which assailed her.

Always on the lookout for arriving ambulances, two men had emerged from the hospital with a stretcher. They came forward at a quick

trot and brought up sharply beside the ambulance.

Pulling herself together Joan addressed them. One of them she knew fairly well.

"There are three men in the ambulance," she said rather shakily. "One of them may be dead by now. He was badly wounded. I lost my way after the bombardment began and so it took me longer to get here. Have any of the Windsor Corps' drivers besides myself reported yet?"

"They have *not*," emphasized one of the stretcher men. "You had all your nerve with you to drive in under fire, Miss Mason."

"I did it against orders," confessed Joan. "I don't know what Captain Seely will say. I felt as though I must do it. Will you please take care of these boys at once. I'm anxious about that one Sammy in particular. Take him first, won't you?"

"He's alive yet," announced one of the bearers as he and his companion gently lifted the shattered form of the soldier boy onto the stretcher.

"Oh, I'm so glad! I do hope he gets well!" was Joan's fervent cry.

By this time two more stretcher men had arrived and busied themselves with the young sergeant. He was very much alive.

"You're a winner, Miss!" he called out from the stretcher. "Shake hands, will you?"

Joan's little hand promptly went out to the plucky lad.

"So are you," she returned warmly. "Take good care of yourself and get well soon. I'm coming to see you in a day or two."

"I'm sure in luck," was the gallant response. As he was borne away he grinned cheerfully and waved his hand to Joan.

With the removal of the third occupant of the ambulance, who had sunk into a stupor, Joan turned to mount to the driver's seat and be on her way. At last she was free to think the thoughts she had sternly driven from her mind during that perilous ride. Where were her comrades now? Had they sought shelter from the fury of the enemy onslaught? What had happened to Val? Perhaps she had also driven away from the trenches and been done to death by a shell.

It could not be. It must not be. Joan bowed her head on the wheel, racked by a storm of silent grief. The inevitable reaction could be staved off no longer. In the face of gravest peril she had shown intrepid courage. She had done a man's work that night. Now that it was finished she found herself just a girl, agonizing girl fashion over the fear that the night's detail had cost her her beloved chum.

CHAPTER XIX

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

"THIS won't do. I must brace up." Regretting her brief surrender to tears, Joan raised her drooping head and squared her shoulders with an impatient jerk.

"I'll drive straight to the shed," she decided. "I'll know then whether any of the cars have come back. Perhaps they have."

It was a forlorn hope. Joan did not really believe that such would be the case. It stood to reason that, unless her comrades had wounded men to look out for, they would hardly have attempted to get away from the trenches while a bombardment was on.

Knowing that Captain Seely's ambulance had been loaded, ready to start, she wondered what had become of it. It had been ahead of her own, yet when she had sped away from the danger zone she had seen no signs of it. It came to her as a belated thought that if it had

remained where it had been standing when the captain sent back the starting signal, her ambulance would certainly have run into it.

It looked very much as if, contrary to her repeated counsel, the captain, too, had driven off under fire, instead of seeking cover during the bombardment.

Now in familiar territory, Joan was not afraid of losing her way a second time. The journey from the field hospital to the ambulance shed was one she had made many times by both darkness and daylight. Moreover, the moon had now risen, which fact made matters infinitely easier for her.

Anxious to make time, she presently drove the ambulance onto a by-road that was a short cut to the shed. It was less smooth than the broader highway she had repudiated in its favor, but it had the added advantage of being less traveled. She was not so likely to have her progress impeded by motor trucks, lorries and tractors that were abroad by night as well as by day.

As she drove along, an occasional motorcycle whizzed by her. Now and then a racer or a roadster, perhaps loaned by some wealthy civilian for war work, dashed past her, hurrying through the night on important business of its own. Aside from a few such encounters she had a comparatively clear road.

She was inwardly congratulating herself on

this when a sharp report rent the night air that caused her almost to lose control of the machine.

Her first wild impression was that some hidden foe with a pistol had fired upon her. An instant later and she knew what had happened. The loud report had announced a bursted tire.

"This is a nice mess," she grumbled as she proceeded to drive the disabled ambulance to one side of the road, out of danger to it and to passing motors.

"I'll have to climb to the roof and get one of those extra tires," she murmured half aloud. "I can get it down all right, but how am I going to put it on alone out here in the dark? Still, it's either that or try to go in on a rim, ruin a wheel or, maybe, upset in the ditch."

So saying Joan nimbly climbed to the roof of the ambulance. Providential recollection that she had forgotten to return to the stretcher bearer the flashlight he had given her to hold, she fumbled in a coat pocket for it.

A gasp of amazement issued from her lips as she trained it on the two extra tires strapped to the car roof. One of them was discouragingly flat. Now she understood whence had come the report she had heard when the shell had, as she thought, struck the ambulance.

A flying fragment of shrapnel had hit the tire and punctured it.

"Thank goodness it left me one, anyway,"

she congratulated, as she proceeded to unstrap the uninjured tire. It was not easy to lift, but she sturdily tackled it and dropped it over the side to the ground.

How to take off the spent tire and adjust the fresh one, under the existing circumstances, was a problem. The moon being on the wane did not furnish sufficient light to work by. She could not manipulate the flashlight and handle the tire at the same time.

"Oh, why couldn't you have held out till I got to the shed?" she ruefully asked the offending tire.

Of a sudden she gave a merry laugh.

"What would Daddykins say if he could see me now?" she reflected. "Here I am stranded at midnight on a lonely road behind the lines. I won't go a step away from here with my ambulance, not if I have to stand guard over it until daylight. Maybe somebody will come along who'll help me. I'll hail the first person who passes."

She had waited for perhaps ten minutes when her ears detected the sound of an approaching motor. As it came nearer she could just make it out by the faint light of the moon. It was a limousine. That meant it held, probably, one or more staff officers. Undoubtedly they would be only too glad to assist her.

"Hello! hello!" she hailed, stepping into the road just far enough to stand clear of the

limousine should it pass her by without heeding her call.

It was almost abreast of her when its driver brought it to dead stop.

"What's the matter?" he inquired in French, peering sharply out at her.

Joan could see his face but very indistinctly. The lower part of it was heavily bearded.

"Won't you please help me?" she begged. In her agitation Joan answered in English. "A tire of my car has blown out and I can't put on another very well by myself on account——"

With a jerk the limousine door opened.

"Q'avez-vous, Henri?"

A woman's voice was sharply addressing the driver. A scarf-draped head partly obtruded itself from the limousine.

"Pardonnez, mademoiselle," he returned almost servilely. Then followed a rapid flow of French which Joan only partially caught.

Though she listened hard, her eyes were fixed on the woman in the motor car. The latter's face stood out whitely against the black of the enveloping scarf.

Joan stifled a cry of amazement. She thought she recognized the woman's features even in that uncertain light.

As she stared fixedly at that now familiar face her ears were busy listening to the driver's apologetic explanation concerning *L'Americaine,* a bursted tire and an ambulance. "I do

not think she speaks French," he was mumbling. "She spoke to me in English. If mademoiselle wishes——"

"Stupid. You are an idiot. Drive on."

All this was said furiously in French. The head was suddenly withdrawn. The door was slammed spitefully shut.

"I have sorry, *mademoiselle,*" mumbled the driver in broken English. "Eet ees eempossible that I——"

"Don't trouble yourself. I understand. It is not your fault. Drive on."

Out of pure mischief Joan made these remarks in French.

They had an electrical effect on the man. He cast one sharp glance at Joan, muttered under his breath, and started the limousine in a hurry.

"Well, of all queer things that's the queerest," muttered Joan after the fleeing limousine. "She didn't know me but *I* know her. It strikes me as very strange that *she* wouldn't help a comrade in distress. What's she doing out at this time of night, I wonder, wrapped in a black cloak and scarf. Maybe she's out on a secret detail for the Allies. That might explain why she wouldn't let dear Henri help me. She might have thought I was a German pretending to be an American. That's a silly thought. She knew I was an ambulance driver. Oh, well, I give it up. Just the same she was perfectly hateful. It simply goes to show that I

was right in my first impression of her. Any way I'll have something to tell the girls. I almost had a conversation with the mysterious 'Cross-roads' Princess."

CHAPTER XX

TRUE TO HER FIRST IMPRESSION

"I'M just out of luck," sighed Joan, as the minutes dragged on and the good Samaritan remained *non est*. "This has certainly been some night. I guess I'm in for spending the rest of it here."

Fifteen minutes later, however, help came in the shape of a motor truck manned by half a dozen Sammies, who were returning to the lines with food supplies.

This time Joan had no complaint to make of ungracious treatment. The lads swarmed down from the truck, eager and willing to help the "game little kid" as they afterward admiringly referred to her among themselves.

Within a few minutes the new tire was on the ambulance and Joan was thanking the Sammies with a frank, pretty graciousness that more than repaid them for the help they had so gladly given.

"It sure does us good to talk with an Amer-

ican girl, Miss!" exclaimed one of them. "We get homesick for a sight of 'em. It kind of brings the good old U. S. nearer."

"You've got sand to be driving around this time of night," admired another. "I've heard, though, that you girls driving ambulances ain't scared of anything. I got to believe it now."

These frank tributes Joan ever afterward cherished. She wished no greater honor than to be approved by Uncle Sam's Boys.

For a little way she drove her ambulance behind their truck. Finally calling them a gay good night, she put on speed and set off in another direction for the ambulance shed.

Headed for home, anxiety for the fate of her comrades returned twofold. The accident to her ambulance, coupled with meeting the Cross-roads' Princess, had briefly erased her greater anxieties. It also dawned on her as she neared her goal that the voices of the guns had ceased. She wondered how long they had been quiet. She could not quite recall when she had last noticed their sullen booming.

Coming within a few feet of the shed, her heart almost skipped a beat. From the darkness of the structure she had caught a welcome sound. It was the low murmur of voices.

"Hello," she called softly. "Who's there?"

She heard a low cry of "Joan!" that thrilled her through and through. Out from the shed and straight to her dashed a dark figure.

"Val! Dear, dear Val!"

Joan had fairly tumbled to the ground and was hugging Valerie in an ecstasy of pent-up joy and relief.

"Oh, Joan, I was afraid—I thought——" Valerie's voice trailed off into a sob.

"So—so was I," quavered Joan. "I—never expected to see you here. I didn't know but that you——"

"My dear child," broke in a new voice. "Thank God you are safe! What happened to you?"

Captain Seely had joined the embracing duo. The trio now clung to one another in a kind of triangular embrace.

"What happened to *you, mon Capitaine?*" queried Joan, with an unsteady laugh. "What became of your ambulance? It was right ahead of me when the grand crash came. I never remembered that, though, until I was well away from danger. Then I wondered."

"So you didn't hunt cover! I ought to discipline you for disobeying orders!" The captain's tones were tender rather than stern.

"I thought about it. I just had to go," Joan cried out earnestly. "Anyway, I got my three men safe to hospital. I had a wild time doing it, though. Twice a shell came and almost got us, but not quite."

"Well, my brave, rash little driver, you are in line for a decoration, it seems. You drove

your ambulance to hospital under fire. I can't scold you. I can only be proud of you."

In the darkness Joan reached up and kissed her chief on the cheek. It was decidedly unmilitary but Joan usually acted on impulse.

"Please tell me what happened to you," she reiterated. "Then Val must tell her tale."

"Let us go to barracks at once. We can talk on the way. Private Warde and I came over here to watch for you. The others of the detail are safe in barracks."

"I'll run my car in in a jiffy." Joan promptly climbed back into the seat. Aided by a powerful flashlight which the captain carried she ran her ambulance into its accustomed place.

"Didn't you say all the girls were back?" was her anxious query as she rejoined her comrades. "There's a vacant space next to my stand."

"There's an ambulance *missing*," the captain grimly announced as the trio started away from the shed.

"Missing? Why, where——"

"Smashed to bits down at the trenches," returned the captain. "That's why you had a clear road to-night."

"*Your* ambulance!" Joan's words conveyed her feelings.

"Yes. I was ready to start when the bombardment began. I made the loop and drove

down into a hollow at one side of the road. I had four boys to look out for. I jumped down from the seat and ran ahead for about fifty yards to see if I could drive deeper into the hollow without upsetting the machine. So I missed the shell that finished the ambulance and the boys in it."

Overcome by the horror of the disaster the captain became briefly silent. A moment and she continued in firm tones:

"The concussion knocked me flat. When I got up to go back I was fairly sure as to what I'd find. It was too dark to see much except when the shells came. By the light of one I saw all that was left of my machine. I hurried back to where you had stopped and found you'd gone. Then I went to look for the others. They hadn't taken on any men yet. So they had left their machines and dived into a dug-out. We all stayed there until it was over."

"How terrible for you," shuddered Joan.

"It's war, my dear. I've been under fire so many times I'm used to it. What I can't get used to, though, is this terrible slaughter of our boys. I daren't stop to think about it long at a time. It's the price we must pay to bring the Huns to their knees, but the price is too high. It's too high," Captain Seely repeated with intense bitterness.

"It was all so *dreadfully* sudden," Valerie now broke into the conversation. She had pur-

posely remained silent and let the captain do the talking. She knew that later she and Joan would have ample time to compare notes. "Everything was so quiet out there. Then came that terrible flash and roar. It was to be expected. Still it was a terrific shock."

"It always is," the captain returned. "The Boches had planned a raid. They were intending to come over but our artillery scared them off before they started. This sector is famous for raids. First one side then the other tries it. We'll have our hands full to-morrow night. There must have been severe casualties. The fire trench was hit hard, they say. The girls each brought a load of *blessés* back to hospital to-night. I was the only one who lost out on the detail, it seems."

"My *blessés* were heroes!" Valerie warmly exclaimed. "They were brave and smiling in spite of their wounds. One of them was a lieutenant. I didn't have a bit of trouble finding my way to hospital. I shall never again be afraid of that part of a trench detail."

"I got lost," confessed Joan. Then went on to relate her adventures. Nor did she omit the incident of the Crossroads' Princess.

"Rather peculiar," was the captain's opinion. "Undoubtedly she had her own good reasons for not wishing to allow her driver to help you. She may be a special agent for the Allies. One never knows who's who out here. Neither

are we permitted to ask questions, much less answer them."

"I suppose there are plenty of spies lurking behind the lines," remarked Joan thoughtfully.

"Too many by far. Only the other day a woman who pretended to be a loyal French peasant was caught harboring two Boches, to whom she had been giving information right along concerning the American troops. That was here in the next village."

"Wouldn't it be queer if this Crossroads' Princess were a spy?" commented Joan, seized by this startling thought. "The girls say she keeps to herself and never says a word to them when they pass by. She smiles but never opens her mouth. Not one of them has ever heard her voice."

"More likely she's merely a very clever young woman," disagreed the captain. "No one, whose record had not been thoroughly investigated, could hold the post which she holds."

"But if she *were* really a spy think of the information she could give the Germans!" persisted Joan.

"That's just the point. Make up your mind she'd never be stationed at that particular intersection of roads if she were not absolutely above reproach."

"Anyway, she needn't have been so hateful to me," Joan said, with a touch of resentment. "Her chauffeur told her I was an American

ambulance driver. I heard him say so in French. She could see my ambulance standing there, too. That, together with my uniform, was proof enough of my integrity."

The captain laughed.

"Perhaps she was as suspicious of you as you now are of her," she pertinently suggested. "Judging from your account, I should say that she must have been engaged in a secret enterprise for our Allies. She may have been carrying important papers on her person and thus feared an attack by Boche agents. The Central Powers have a few women workers who are said to outrank the men spies in boldness and daring. It would be quite in keeping with Boche tactics to send out a captured ambulance manned by a select detail of Hun butchers and driven by a girl decoy, dressed as an American ambulance driver."

Joan reluctantly admitted all this. The captain's theory was more just and also more plausible than her own. She tried to convince herself that the suspicion she had impulsively voiced had sprung solely from unreasoning dislike of the mysterious young woman. Deep in her heart, however, she knew differently. Intuition bade her mistrust the Crossroads' Princess.

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNGRACIOUS RECEPTION

THOUGH the Khaki Girls' first trench detail had proved so perilously eventful, others which followed it were scarcely less dangerous. Trench raids having apparently become the fashion, both sides strove zealously to follow it.

Each night a faithful ambulance crew drove forth under the sheltering cloak of darkness on their errand of mercy. This duty was divided among the Trusty Twenty, five to a detail.

Valerie and Joan would have liked to go to the trenches every night. Captain Seely was too prudent a chief to allow them any such concession.

"If anything were to happen to you on your regular detail, I should accept it as having been inevitable. On the contrary, if I allowed you to go out of turn, and either or both of you came to grief, I should never cease to reproach myself. Unless a great emergency should arise

you will have to be satisfied with one night out of five for trench duty."

This was her ultimatum. The Khaki Girls accepted it gracefully enough, but grumbled considerably to each other in private. They had grown to look upon danger with a careless eye. Weeks of living in a land where the commonest sound to be heard was the booming of the guns had had its effect upon them. As Val optimistically declared, "There's only one shell made that will ever hit us. When it does we won't know anything about it. So what's the use in worrying."

The chums found plenty of work by day to keep them occupied. They made long drives, conveying wounded soldiers from the field hospital to the nearest base hospital. Often they were called upon to take men from the field hospital to the ambulance trains, which carried the injured soldiers directly to Paris.

Then, too, there were long hours spent in the ambulance shed, making repairs and putting the ambulances in good trim after a hard run over muddy roads. In fact, there always seemed more to be done than could possibly be crowded into daylight hours. Both girls had difficulty in finding time to write their home letters.

Greatly to their delight they had already received a first relay of letters from across the sea. Everyone to whom they had written im-

mediately after their arrival at the barracks had responded with long letters to which the censors had seemingly been kindly disposed, as little of their contents had been blotted out.

Each was made happy by a letter from Captain Bartram. Captain Seely also received one from their former chief, which caused her to laughingly accuse the chums of being altogether too reticent concerning themselves.

"Why didn't you speak up and say you were the Invincible Khaki Girls?" she had demanded of them. "I read all about you in the newspapers, even if they were six weeks old when they came to me. Strange I didn't recall your names. I thought, too, when first I heard them, that they had a familiar sound."

The remainder of the Trusty Twenty were duly informed of whom they had in their midst, and the Corps got up a little jollification at supper that same evening in honor of their distinguished comrades. Georgia Stevens was particularly jubilant by reason of being able to boast, "I knew it all the time."

As time passed and the chums grew proficient in their dangerous work, both Valerie and Joan had frequent occasion to drive past the point in the intersecting highways ruled over by the Crossroads' Princess.

To Valerie alone Joan had confided her instinctive distrust of the pretty traffic director.

"You shouldn't allow such ideas to prejudice

you against a fellow worker," Valerie had gently reproved. "Those queer, first-sight dislikes of yours are terribly unjust, Joan. Why should you be so rabid against a girl you've never exchanged a word with?"

"I wish I *had* exchanged a word with her!" Joan had vehemently exclaimed. "I'd know then whether it was really her I saw that night in the limousine. I'm perfectly sure, though, that it was. The next time I drive past her I'm going to make her speak to me."

This was easier said than done. When the occasion finally arrived it yielded Joan nothing. Passing the mute Princess, Joan leaned out and addressed a remark to her in a deceitfully friendly tone. She imagined the deep blue eyes narrowed a trifle though she was not positive of this. An instant and the beautiful face grew radiantly smiling as the girl answered not in words but with a gesture that might convey much or little. Immediately afterward she imperatively signaled Joan to drive on.

"A regular cat that ate the canary smile," was Joan's onward disgruntled comparison. "She was very careful not to say a word. I wonder if she ever talks to anyone or just stands and waves her hands and beams like a Chessy cat. She seemed anxious to get rid of me in a hurry."

After this one unsuccessful attempt to wring speech from the perversely speechless, Joan

gave up in disgust, for the time being, at least. She reflected somewhat sheepishly that she had come to France not as a sleuth but as an ambulance driver.

Nor did she realize that her curious, unfounded suspicion of this stranger was indirectly a result of the training she had received while working for the Department of Justice. The will to observe closely the most trifling details and then to make shrewd deductions had become ingrained.

Resolved to forget the whole thing, Joan's mind would wander occasionally in spite of herself to that night encounter on the road. She could not forget the sound of that low, furious voice as it lashed out at the chauffeur. There was a peculiar quality in those tones that reminded her of another voice, which had also been raised in angry expostulation and against herself. It was most peculiar, she thought, that not only the face but the voice as well of the Crossroads' Princess recalled to her the alien woman she had searched on board the *Netherlands,* to the latter's sorrow.

Driving away from the field hospital one afternoon, whither she had gone with a peasant man and woman, the victims of a bomb dropped on their cottage, Joan's cogitations concerning the mysterious traffic director received fresh impetus.

Recently the press of ambulance duty had

been so great as to erase all else from her mind. Three days' stiff fighting at the trenches had filled the field hospital to overflowing. Joan and Valerie had been on duty from early until late in consequence.

Joan was driving rather slowly past an isolated stone house set well back from the road when an untoward impulse directed her eyes to a small straggling orchard behind it. Under the fruit-laden boughs of a gnarled apple-tree two women stood, apparently deep in conversation. One of them, a peasant, appeared to be talking excitedly, her strong hands in continual play. The other—even at that distance Joan recognized her instantly. She was the Cross-roads' Princess.

Running the ambulance along a little further until a clump of trees growing by the roadside screened it from view, Joan left it to take care of itself and went back a few yards for a closer view of the pair.

Finally pausing behind a tall flowering bush that bloomed riotously by the wayside, she watched the two in the orchard. It was evident they had not noted the passing of the ambulance. They had not once looked toward the road since first she had spied them.

She had not stood there long when she saw the girl lightly kiss the older woman on both cheeks. Then she turned, darted away through the orchard, and was soon lost to view. The

woman watched her briefly, then walked slowly toward the cottage.

Impelled by a swift impulse, Joan left her covert and marched serenely up to the front door of the little house. Though the weather was extremely warm the door was closed.

Joan beat an energetic tattoo on the panels. She was presently awarded by the sound of heavy footsteps from within.

The door opened very slowly, not more than halfway. She found herself facing the peasant woman. The latter's bushy eyebrows were drawn together in a deep frown. Her sharp black eyes looked her caller through and through.

"*Que voulez-vous?*" she asked in harsh, forbidding tones.

"*J'ai soif,*" returned Joan sweetly. "*Veuillez me donner un verre d'eau?*"

"*C'est impossible,*" was the ungracious refusal.

The door was banged smartly in Joan's face.

"Whew!" she ejaculated, then laughed. "That doesn't speak well for the far-famed courtesy of the French. Now why do you suppose she acted like that?" she asked herself as she walked away from the inhospitable door.

Glancing back she glimpsed a dark, scowling face peering at her through a window of the cottage. In a spirit of mischief Joan derisively waved her hand to it. It disappeared.

"Serves me right for playing along the way," was her crestfallen reflection as she climbed into her ambulance and drove on. "I wonder if that's where the Princess lives. She certainly has a dragon to guard her. I'll bet I'm the first one to see her at home. Wait until I tell the girls."

But she never told them. Returning to the ambulance shed she was fated to meet with a shock. Coming in sight of it her heart began a wild thumping. It was not the shed she had left several hours ago. It was nothing now but a smouldering rubbish heap. Fritz had at last managed to deliver a knock-out blow.

CHAPTER XXII

MARCELLE'S STORY

DRIVING closer to the unsightly wreckage that had once been the Corps garage, Joan caught sight of a familiar figure.

It was old Marcelle, who came running toward her. Waving her brawny arms in despairing fashion, the woman launched forth into a torrent of French, intermingled with broken English.

"Is it not terrible, Mademoiselle Joan?" she shrieked. "All is destroyed,—all! Those pigs of Germans! and this one pig—— I saw him as he passed overhead. Praise *le bon Dieu,*" she crossed herself, "not an ambulance was in that shed. All were away from here. It is the great good luck! Rather would I have it that my own house should thus be wrecked. But it cannot to be. For me is the Divine protection. There are those above who guard old Marcelle!"

Again she crossed herself.

"When did this happen, Marcelle?"

Joan had hurriedly climbed down from the ambulance and now stood beside the excited peasant.

"But a half-hour since. No more than that. I had left the *baraque* to go to my house. I saw him appear in the heavens as from nowhere. *Mon Dieu,* how fast he traveled! But a second and his cursed work was done. I heard the great noise as of thunder. It was no new sound. One knows it then too well. This pig feared not the daylight. Away he soared. Then I saw rise from behind our lines two of our flying heroes. The Boche beast they followed. I watched for a little, but in the bright sun my old eyes had the ache. Soon they were but three dots, far away, and I looked no more, but came here, knowing that which I should see."

"Are you sure that every machine was out of the shed before it was bombed?" Joan anxiously questioned.

"Thanks be to *le bon Dieu,* none reposed there," was the positive assertion. "Some went away soon after you this morning. At midday came to our *capitaine* the message. Then in the *baraque* was the hurry and much talk. All went across the fields with our *capitaine.* Soon I saw the long procession of ambulances. Of those who went with her none re-

turned. Thus I know that the shed was empty."

"Some of the girls may have been in there repairing their ambulances, Marcelle!"

Joan turned pale as she uttered this dread conjecture.

"It may be," shrugged Marcelle. "Still I do not believe. They went at midday. It is now growing toward sunset. They would have not stayed thus long in the shed, would they?"

"I can't say, I know I've spent as much time as that and more fixing my ambulance. What we must do is to circle this wreckage and see if we—if we—find——"

Joan's voice trailed away into silence. The thought that perhaps one or more of her comrades lay mangled among the ruins was unspeakable.

For half an hour the two peered and prowled about the wrecked shed. Far from finding the horrors they feared they might come upon, they were unable to discover even a trace of anything resembling the shattered parts of an ambulance.

"I am not the only one to whom the Divine protection is given," Marcelle declared reverently when at last they paused to rest.

Fairly confident now that no one of the Trusty Twenty had been done to death by the bomb, the two women decided to go on to barracks.

"That reminds me, Marcelle," Joan said, as

they started across the field. "George told me that you had an interesting story to tell about your little house. She said you could tell it better than she."

"Mademoiselle Georgette is the kind rascal," smiled Marcelle. "She has know that I like this story to tell. She has know that it gives me the pleasure. Well, it happened thus. Of a truth you may not believe. It is most strange."

"Of course, I'll believe it," asserted Joan.

"It is not long, but strange; most strange," reiterated Marcelle. "You must know that when *les Allemands* come first to tear out the heart of France I was the very rich woman. Not rich with money and lands. But have I five sons, strong, beautiful and most brave."

Marcelle paused. Into her black eyes crept a sudden light. On her rugged face dawned an expression of exaltation which was far more tragic than tears.

"I gave all to France," she said simply. "Three died at Ypres; one at Arras, and one at the battle of the Marne.

"That is but the beginning," she continued. "Some have said that Marcelle has, of a truth, the gift of second sight. This maybe truth for sometimes in the night when all was darkness I have seen the face of *mon mari,* long dead.

"So it happened that on the night of the day when I received the bad message that my last of five sons had died of wounds in hospital,

there came to me a vision or dream, I know not which. I saw my Pierre, *mon mari,* and heard him say, 'Be at peace. Our sons are now with me. We are six to guard you.'

"That is all, Mademoiselle Joan, but you see for yourself that the house of Marcelle still stands. So it must be until *les Allemands* are driven from France and all is well again. For myself it would not matter how soon came my death. Yet it has pleased *le bon Dieu* that I shall remain here. This I know because he has permitted my dear ones thus to watch over me. I am content."

The quiet nobility of this utterance, "I am content," brought a lump to Joan's throat. Deeply moved she could think of nothing to say which would express her feelings. So she merely slipped her hand in that of the peasant.

Marcelle caught it in both her own strong brown hands.

"You have the sympathy, the understanding," she said. "I thank you. It is enough. Shall we not now speak of other things?"

Mention of "other things" caused Joan's mind to revert to the ungracious peasant who had banged the door in her face.

"Marcelle," she began abruptly, "do you know any of the peasants in this locality?"

"Almost all," returned Marcelle. "In the village south of here I was born. There I lived until I grew to be a woman and married *mon*

Pierre. So it is that I know the people for many miles around."

"Something odd happened to me this morning."

Joan recounted the incident describing the inhospitable peasant woman and the isolated cottage in which she lived.

"Ah, yes, I know. It was she, the old Yvette Rôget. She is of a certainty—the great dragon. A strange, surly woman, this Yvette. It is many years since she came alone to live in the village. There she lived not long but moved to the lonely cottage, where she has since lived. She has no relatives, no friends. She wishes none. Some have suspected her to be the ally of *les Allemands.*"

"Are you sure of that?" Joan asked quickly. "Before I went to her door to ask for a glass of water I saw her in the orchard talking to a girl. I thought the girl might possibly be living at her house. They were standing in the orchard talking confidentially. I could see that much. Then the girl kissed her on both cheeks and ran away through the orchard."

"That is most strange," wondered Marcelle. "Old Yvette is not one to kiss or to be kissed. Once, I recall, many years ago, Yvette had the company. A woman and a little girl came from far away to make her the visit. Some say it was from England they came. I know not."

"Did you ever notice the girl who directs

traffic at the crossroads?" Joan asked with sudden irrelevance.

Marcelle favored Joan with a swift, half-startled glance.

"I have seen her there, yes," she replied. After an instant's hesitation she added: "Why do you ask, Mademoiselle Joan?"

"Oh, I just wondered. I don't mind telling *you,* Marcelle, that she's the girl I saw talking to this Yvette to-day."

Marcelle stared frowningly at Joan, then burst forth:

"I will tell you a something very queer about that girl, Mademoiselle. You must give me that promise that it shall not pass your lips."

"Very good. I promise."

Laughing, Joan held up her right hand.

"It is well," nodded Marcelle. "When, almost a year ago, this girl came to stand at the crossroads she brought with her the letter of introduction to a very rich family in the village. The name of this family was Pincon. For Madame Pincon I had long been the *blanchisseurse.* She had the great affection for me. It was she who gave me my *dot* so that I might not go empty-handed to *mon* Pierre.

"Now Madame Pincon had the many grand jewels. Few knew this, for she wore scarcely ever any of them. But to me she had shown them often, and of them I never told anyone. They were worth many, many thousand francs.

In her house she had also many wonderful things of great value.

"Then came the war," continued Marcelle, "and she greatly feared for her jewels and all, that *les Allemands* would take them from her. She put the jewels in a secret hiding place in her house of which none knew save herself.

"When arrived this girl with the letter Madame Pincon made the great friend of her. I have heard Madame say that she has known well the mother of this girl."

"What is this girl's name?" eagerly interrupted Joan.

"I am sorry. That I cannot remember." Marcelle shook her head. "Soon after she came the house of Madame Pincon was entered by *les Allemands*. They took away much but knew not of the jewels. Why they burned not her house I do not know. They stripped it, but no more than that. It was permitted thus to remain.

"As I have said, Madame had made much of this girl. I did not like her, though never had I spoken to her. Once, then, I said to Madame, 'I think this girl has the hard heart.' This made Madame very angry with me and so I went to her house no more to work.

"So it was that one night *les Allemands,* eight of them, entered Madame's house. They killed her and her two children and burned the beautiful house to the ground. But a maid,

the daughter of a friend of mine, hid herself in the midst of a great green bush and happily came to no harm.

"She it was who saw two soldiers carry out of the house between them a steel casket. After that Madame's fine house was burned. Now I ask you, Mademoiselle Joan, how did *les Allemands* know where to find that casket?"

"Do you mean—do you think——" stammered Joan, "that—this girl helped the Germans?"

"Assuredly, Mademoiselle Joan. In some fashion *les Allemands* must have learned of the jewels. When first they came to the house of Madame Pincon they could not find them. *Voila!* They had no trouble a second time. Someone helped them. Someone who was near to Madame."

"But, Marcelle, this girl is working for the Allies," Joan reminded. "She has taken the Oath of Allegiance to serve them faithfully. You say that Madame Pincon was a friend of the girl's mother. Under those circumstances she would hardly have acted thus, even if she were a traitor."

"Spies are spies. They have many different cloaks to wear on many occasions," Marcelle argued.

"Do you believe she is a spy for the Central Powers?"

Joan's voice held a note of suppressed eager-

ness. It seemed unbelievable that she should have stumbled thus unexpectedly upon one whose theory so nearly coincided with her own.

"Why not?" shrugged Marcelle. "Yet who would believe were I to go to the high ones? Proof, I have not; only I believe."

"You have no case; that's true," nodded Joan. "Still your story, if you had told it to an Intelligence officer, would have started an investigation."

"I was afraid. I am but a poor peasant. This girl is clever, very clever. So I have told but you."

"See here, Marcelle. If I found out all by myself that this girl was not loyal to the Allies, would you be willing then to stand by me with your story?"

"Ah, but yes," Marcelle's black eyes flashed. "I would be glad for that I have loved Madame Pincon much."

"All right. That's a promise." Joan stretched forth a hand to bind it. "Where do you go from here, Marcelle?" she asked. "On to the barracks with me or home?"

"Never home yet. With you I will wait for the return of the ambulances. We shall see them come over the elevation. Then we shall meet them and tell the bad news," decided Marcelle. "It grows late. I shall the supper prepare against their return. It will be for you to watch, Mademoiselle Joan."

The barracks reached, Marcelle entered, leaving Joan to sit down in the open doorway where she could catch a first glimpse of the returning ambulances.

Chin in hands, she gave herself up to trying to weave together into a definite pattern all she had seen and heard of the Crossroads' Princess. First of all came the night encounter on the road. Then followed the refusal of the traffic girl to speak to her. After that came the incident of the orchard and last of all Marcelle's story. This last alone pointed definitely toward disloyalty toward the Allies. Still, after all, it connected the girl but vaguely with the looting and burning of Madame Pincon's home and the murder of the French woman and her children.

The Boches had merely employed their usual fiendish tactics. Thousands of other French folks had suffered the same fate. There was but one thing that was really different about it. The brutes had let the house stand, returning a second time to finish their dastardly work.

How to get a line on the suspect's maneuvers, be they innocent or traitorous, Joan could see no prospect. She could not neglect her work to go on a trail that might only end in a blind alley. All she could do was to be always on the alert, eyes and ears ever open. It was not a specially hopeful prospect, but she had a curious presentiment that Chance would perhaps look kindly upon her.

CHAPTER XXIII

ON THE ROAD TO BARRACKS

THE destruction of the ambulance shed provoked much angry chatter and lively lamentation on the part of the returning nineteen members of the Trusty Twenty. Once over the first shock of surprise, they were forced to regard it as one of the inevitable consequences of living near the firing line.

That night a long row of ambulances was parked behind barracks under the open sky. According to light-hearted Georgia Stevens:

"We're not worse off than the ambulance men. They fairly live outdoors and park their machines on hillsides, in ditches, or most any old place. Our dear departed shed was just a streak of pure good luck. We can thank the 48th Engineers for it and say, 'Peace to its ashes.' We were lucky not to be caught in the shed when the bomb hit it. Are we downhearted? Well, not so you can notice it."

This cheerful view of the disaster was shared

by her comrades. They had lived too long in the heart of danger to be more than momentarily dejected by such a catastrophe. It was a misfortune of war. They calmly accepted it as such and went on about their business.

The development the very next night of a German offensive against a point of the American sector situated in a village several miles to the south of that part of the trenches nearest the Corps barracks kept the Trusty Twenty steadily on the go.

American casualties were very heavy. Ambulances from far and near, manned by both men and women drivers, were on constant duty, bearing away the wounded men who had made such a gallant fight.

The Trusty Twenty were among those foremost in the work of mercy. It was the longest siege of duty that had come to Valerie and Joan since they had joined the Corps. It seemed to both as though they fairly lived in their ambulances. They carried with them emergency rations which they devoured as they drove. Often the only sleep they managed to get was snatched while sitting on the driver's seat. They roughed it, even as did the ambulance men.

The German offensive having failed, there came a lull in the fighting. For a week comparative quiet settled down on that part of the sector. With the Americans sturdily holding

the village, the enemy paused to consider and plan fresh onslaughts.

During that welcome interlude, the Khaki Girls once more made the acquaintance of barracks. Even this rude shelter seemed the height of comfort after the discomforts they had recently endured. True they were not in barracks long at a time. Their services were in demand at the field hospital. Often they had to make long drives to the more remote base hospitals. Late at night, however, they usually managed to make port at barracks.

During frequent drives to and from the field hospital, Joan often passed Yvette's sequestered cottage. More than once she caught glimpses of Yvette peering scowlingly at her from door or window.

Joan never saw the fierce-eyed old woman without thinking of the Crossroads' Princess. Press of stern work, however, had tended to diminish her interest in the latter. She seldom passed the intersecting roads reigned over by the girl traffic director. Neither had she found opportunity for another confidential talk with Marcelle.

Unable to budge the Khaki Boys from the village they were grimly holding, Fritz had resorted to a series of bombing roads. Night after night they continued, doing more damage to the innocent villagers than to the troops stationed there.

This meant added duty for the Trusty Twenty. Hardly a day passed that did not see Joan and Valerie hurrying to a wrecked home to bear thence and to hospital victims of Hun spite. Soon the girls of the Windsor Corps became familiar figures to the scourged villagers, who hailed them as angels of mercy. Though Joan could not know it, her comings and goings in the village had suddenly become of particular interest to Yvette Rôget, for reasons best known to the peasant woman alone. Nor did her private opinion of Joan coincide with that of the village fold.

Heart-sick after a day of horrors, the result of a Kultur bombing party of the previous night, Joan left the field hospital one evening at dark wondering gloomily if the war would ever end. She was not tired of her chosen calling, but she was intensely weary of seeing others suffer.

Wrapped in dark meditations, she drove more slowly than usual, paying small attention to her surroundings. She had grown so used to the road she was following that even in the dark, she was now absolutely sure of herself.

As a consequence of her abstraction, for once she failed to hear the purr of a motor behind her and just missed being run into by an automobile as it dashed past her.

"I'd better wake up," she said aloud with a rueful little laugh. "That car was certainly

going fast. Staff orders, I presume. This business of driving without lights or motor horns is risky."

Though she did not increase the speed of the ambulance, she put away her somber reflections and became on the alert.

She had already covered half the distance between the hospital and barracks. In spite of the darkness she knew herself to be in the vicinity of the lone cottage occupied by the surly peasant woman, Yvette Rôget.

Coming almost abreast of it, Joan was startled by a sudden echoing cry in French of, "Help! Oh, please help me!"

It was unmistakably a woman who had cried out, and the sound came from a point on the road a few yards ahead of the ambulance.

"Who are you? What's the matter?" Joan called out in the same tongue.

Acting in a flash, she brought the machine to a quick and sudden stop.

"I beseech you to come with me," entreated an anguished voice. "My poor aunt has been seriously injured by the bomb."

A dark figure was now drawing closer to the ambulance.

"Who is your aunt?"

As she asked the question, Joan leaned down from the driver's seat. She was endeavoring to obtain a satisfactory look at the woman. All she could discern was an indistinct, shapeless

form. She judged that the woman was wrapped in a long, dark cloak or shawl, thrown over her head and falling in long, straight folds to her feet.

So closely was it drawn about her head that Joan could see her face only as a small white patch in the dark. She was totally unable to distinguish the imploring stranger's features.

"In the cottage just back from this road," replied the entreating voice. "But a few moments since I came to the cottage of my aunt to pay the visit. It was then I found her, with the shattered arm. Last night while walking in her orchard a bomb came. Thus she was injured and lay long in the orchard. With the morning she dragged herself into the kitchen where she has since lain, unable to move. Her groans rend the heart! At first I knew not what to do. Then I bethought myself of the brave ambulance girls who dwelt not far from here. So I was about to go to their baraque when you appeared, even as an angel."

"I'm rather a funny-looking angel," was Joan's dry comment.

It had flashed across her mind that the French the woman spoke was singularly pure for a peasant. Moreover, the cottage of the injured aunt was that of Yvette Rôget. Marcelle had stated that Yvette had neither friends nor relatives. More, that she had been suspected of favoring the Germans.

Warned by a sudden premonition of impending evil, Joan did some rapid thinking.

"Is it that you will not help me?" demanded the woman almost angrily. "Why do you not speak?"

"I was just thinking what would be best."

Joan's tones were calm and steady. She knew quite well what would be best, for her, at least.

"You and I will have to carry your aunt on a stretcher to the ambulance," she now said. "I have one in the machine. If I can drive close up to the cottage it will be easier for us both."

"We can indeed do so," eagerly assured the voice. "There is the path to the cottage, wide enough for the ambulance."

"All right. Climb up beside me," ordered Joan. "You will have to show me just where to drive."

Pulling her head-covering closer about her face, the woman climbed nimbly up beside Joan.

"Go you on for a few yards, then——"

The rest of the sentence was lost as Joan suddenly started the car with a jerk. It leaped forward like a living thing under her skilful little hands.

"Stop!" shrieked the woman. "You go too far!"

Simultaneous with the protest she clutched at Joan's hands in a savage endeavor to wrench them from the wheel. Missing them in the dark-

ness, she sent out a shrill, echoing cry, half whistle, half call.

From behind Joan heard a succession of sharp reports. Several bullets whined past the ambulance as it fled along at top speed.

Joan continued to send the car forward, clinging desperately to the wheel from which the woman again was endeavoring to drag her hands. An instant and she had let go her hold only to begin striking Joan fiercely with clenched fists.

Half stunned by the rain of savage blows, Joan's hold on the wheel was relaxed for a second. The ambulance lurched sharply as it struck a rut in the road. The vengeful unknown lurched with it.

As it righted itself, Joan realized two things. The blows had ceased to fall. She was alone on the seat. The supposed peasant had lost her balance and pitched off the ambulance.

Unmindful of the fact that she was under fire, Joan instantly stopped the machine. Springing down, she pulled her flashlight from a coat pocket and ran back over the road. She had not run far when she stumbled over something soft and yielding. It was the body of the supposed peasant.

With frantic energy Joan caught the limp form by the shoulders and dragged it toward the ambulance. If only she could manage to get it inside the body of the car before those

who had fired on her arrived on the scene! Strangely enough, she could hear no sound of running footsteps.

She did not doubt, however, that she would soon hear them. She was less than a mile from Yvette's cottage. It would not take her pursuers long to come up with her. Well, she was ready for them. Her revolver hung in its holster at her belt. She would fight for her life. She now knew that she had narrowly escaped falling into a trap.

Reaching the ambulance with her burden, she was in despair as to how she might place it inside. Without help she could not stay where she was. Neither did she purpose to go on without the stranger who had attempted to lure her on to disaster. Dead or alive, Joan was determined to discover the decoy's identity.

Studying for a moment, Joan next dragged the motionless figure to the lower step of the ambulance. Exerting all her strength, she managed to lift the inanimate form onto the step, placing it in a sitting posture. Then she proceeded to climb over it and up into the space in front of the seat.

Pausing briefly to rest and listen, she knelt in the space, caught the unconscious woman by the shoulders and, little by little, hauled her up into the ambulance, leaving the stranger's feet to hang down over the side.

Satisfied that her apparently lifeless prisoner

would not slide off the machine, once it was in motion, Joan started it carefully, driving as fast as she dared.

As she got under way she thought she heard faint voices far behind her, though she was not sure. Soon, however, a new sound from the rear set her thrilling with apprehension. It was the steady purr of a motor.

Traveling as fast as she dared under the circumstances, Joan realized that the other car was gaining on her. Keeping one hand on the wheel, she reached with the other for her revolver. Drawing it from the holster, she held it ready for instant use.

In that moment of desperation a new sound smote her ears. It was an odd little trill, fondly reminiscent of school-girl days. To Joan it was the most welcome sound she had ever heard. She answered it with a will as she slowed down to a stop. Her heart pounded wildly with joyous relief as another ambulance drove up beside her own.

"Val!" she called softly. "Is it really you, old dear?"

"Yes," came back Valerie's low, sweet tones. "I could just make out an ambulance ahead of me. I trilled on a venture, hoping it was yours."

"You've come in good time, Val. Get down and see what I have here."

"What is it?"

Promptly obeying, Valerie appeared almost instantly beside Joan's ambulance.

"Why—oh!" she uttered in amazement, as Joan flashed a light upon her prisoner. "A woman! Is she dead? Who is she?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to. Hold the light, Val. Train it on her face."

Valerie took the flashlight Joan handed her, bringing it to bear on the woman's head.

Reaching down, Joan pulled a frilled black cloak hood off the stranger's head.

A subdued shout went up from both girls as they stared down at the white face, framed in a wealth of pale golden hair.

"The Crossroads' Princess! I can't believe my own eyes!" was Valerie's wondering cry.

"I *can*," Joan grimly declared. "I've always mistrusted her. Now I know I was right. Help me lay her on the ground, Val, until I see if she's dead or alive. We must hurry. They may be after us. By the way, did you meet anyone on the road when you passed Yvette's cottage."

"I didn't pass it. I took the short cut and came onto this road above it," returned Valerie. "What does all this mean, Joan? I don't——"

"I'll explain later. No time now."

As they talked the chums had buckled down to the task of laying the unconscious girl traffic director on the ground to one side of the road.

"She's not dead," announced Joan after a

hasty examination. "She's only stunned by the fall she took off the ambulance. Wait till I open the door. Then we'll lift her into the machine and be on our way as fast as we can travel."

With Valerie's help the mysterious Cross-roads' Princess was soon safely stowed in the back of Joan's ambulance. Joan slammed the door on her with a smart bang that fully indicated her feelings.

"It hasn't been a very lucky evening for *her*," she emphasized, as she turned away. "I should say, too, that the worst was yet to come. I'm not sure, Val, but I think I've captured a prize. A prize spy, I mean."

"Hark!" she held up her hand. "That's the whirr of a motor! Into your car, Val. We've got to beat it in a hurry."

Still wholly mystified, Valerie ran to her ambulance and sprang up into it. Joan sought her place at the wheel of her own machine with lightning rapidity.

Allowing Valerie to take the lead, Joan was about to swing in behind her when an automobile dashed up beside her ambulance. From it a man made a flying leap and landed on the ambulance's lower step.

"Halt!" Joan ordered sternly. "Another step and I'll——"

Unheeding, the man sprang savagely at her. Came a sharp report. The invader threw up his

hands and fell backward, landing in a crumpled heap between the two cars.

The revolver slid from Joan's nerveless hands. Shaking like a leaf she dropped back in the driver's seat.

"Joan, Joan! Are you hurt?"

From ahead Valerie had heard the shot and come back on the run.

"No; not hurt. The man—— He sprang at me. I had to shoot. I think I killed him! He's down there between the two cars."

Pulling herself together Joan joined Valerie on the ground. Together the two nerved themselves to examine the man. On her knees beside the body, Joan's flashlight was turned full on the face of her assailant. It was not an unfamiliar face.

"This is the man who drove the limousine that night when the Princess refused to let him help me with the tire," Joan quietly informed Valerie. "We'll have to turn around, Val, and go back to the field hospital. Before I met you I had intended to take the woman on to barracks. I didn't want to go back alone. Besides, I wanted Captain Seely to see her. Now we might as well take them both to the hospital and be done with that part of it. Then we must hurry to barracks. I need the captain's advice as to what to do about this night's work."

"It's all Greek to me," Valerie cried out in perplexity.

"It was a trap, Val. That's all I can tell you now. Give me your first aid packet and hold the light. I'll do what I can for this creature. You'll have to take him in your ambulance."

Under the hasty first-aid treatment Joan gave the wounded man, he stirred, moaning a little.

"He's far from dead," was Valerie's opinion.

"He'll probably live to straighten out a few little matters," Joan satirically declared.

The task of placing the wounded man in Valerie's ambulance finally accomplished, Joan bethought herself to take a look at the captive stowed away in her own ambulance.

As she opened its rear door, she called out in sudden dismay. The rays of her flashlight revealed only empty space. The Crossroads' Princess had vanished.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

THE strange story which, an hour later, Joan recounted to Valerie and Captain Seely, resulted in a midnight trip to the village for Joan and the captain. The latter had insisted that not a moment should be lost in repeating it to a French Intelligence officer who was quartered there.

Before morning Yvette Rôget's cottage and environments had been searched by a detail of special officers. No signs of demolishment by the alleged bomb had been discovered. At dawn, however, old Yvette had been dragged forth from a small dugout in the orchard, so cleverly concealed as almost to escape detection. The dugout proved to be the entrance to an underground passage that led directly into the cellar of the cottage.

Not one word of confession, however, could the authorities wring from the old woman's obstinate lips. Whatever she knew she kept

locked behind them. To all questions she made but one reply: "I know nothing!"

As for the mysterious Crossroads' Princess, she had apparently vanished into thin air. It was conceded that she had undoubtedly come to consciousness during the time the Khaki Girls had been occupied with her wounded ally, and cleverly slipped away in the darkness. Her own acts had proven her to be a traitor to the Allies, yet who she really was still remained a mystery.

It was likely to remain one until the wounded man in hospital was able to speak and furnish the solution, provided he could be made to speak. Weakened from loss of blood, he lay in a state of semi-consciousness that forbade inquisition. His clothing had been subjected to a minute search but nothing had been found to indicate who he was nor what his relations might be with the enemy.

It was still a question in Joan's mind as to whether the trap had been set for her in particular, or whether any member of the Corps chancing to drive past the cottage at that time might not have had a similar experience. For all she knew a plot might have been on foot to gain possession of an ambulance and its driver for reasons best known to the instigators.

Though she had suspected the girl traffic director of traitorism, the latter could not possibly have known that. It was barely probable

that she might have aroused the suspicions of Yvette on the day she had stopped at the cottage to ask for a glass of water. The guilty are usually inclined to suspect everyone.

The attack upon herself might be explained by the fact that she had driven off with the mysterious Princess. Those who waited at the cottage had quickly discovered that their plans had not worked out successfully. The non-return of the Princess had been the signal for pursuit. It was evident that the man Joan had wounded was a trusted confederate of the girl. He had proved that conclusively.

When a week had slipped by, during which no light had been thrown on the baffling affair, Joan ceased to puzzle over it. She was not surprised, however, to learn that the man in hospital had confessed to being a spy employed by the Central Powers. More, he admitted that the Crossroads' Princess was in reality a German noblewoman who had offered her services to the Fatherland at the beginning of the war. He claimed to be her cousin.

Questioned regarding the motive for the attempt to decoy Joan into Yvette's cottage, he professed absolute ignorance.

"I do not know why Hilda wished to do thus," he had denied. "I know only that she had the great fear of this girl with the golden hair. Once we chanced to meet her at night on the road. She asked me for help to make the repair

to her ambulance. It was after that Hilda told me the girl must be watched. So we watched her, old Yvette and I.

"Then Hilda said we must obtain possession of this girl and shut her away where she could do no harm. But we could never catch her until the night I saw her leave the village alone in her ambulance. I followed her in the limousine and when I saw that she took the road to the cottage of Yvette, I put on the speed and passed her.

"So I came to the cottage some moments before her and ran in. Hilda was there with Yvette. When I told her of the girl, she put on a black cloak and went out to the road. We waited at the cottage, Yvette and I, to seize this girl when Hilda brought her to us. But she came not, neither did Hilda return. I grew afraid for Hilda and gave chase to the girl with the limousine. Then she shot me. She is very brave. I am sorry that I did not kill her. No wonder Hilda greatly feared her!"

Duly informed of all this, Joan could still think of no special reason why the German noblewoman should have thus feared her, beyond that of her chance meeting with the latter that night on the road. It was highly probable that the Princess had been abroad on some nefarious errand and thus feared that recognition by Joan might lead the latter to wonder why a supposedly loyal Allied helper should be mys-

teriously driving about alone at that hour of the night.

It was not until almost a month later that Joan came into a clear comprehension of the mystery. Leaving her ambulance standing one day in front of one of the tiny village shops while she entered the place to make some trifling purchase, she returned to it to find a surprise awaiting her.

Lying on the driver's seat, in plain sight, was a square white envelope addressed to "Mademoiselle Joan Mason."

Her eyes round with astonishment, Joan hastily tore open the envelope and drew forth a sheet of heavy white paper, elaborately monogramed in gold. Her amazement grew as she read:

"MADEMOISELLE:

"When you read this I shall be in my beloved Germany where even your prying eyes may not seek me out. Know this, that I hate you with an undying hatred because it was you who caused my mother to be put in a prison in your horrible United States. It was on board the *Netherlands* that you made the search and discovered the papers which were entrusted to her to give our most noble Kaiser.

"Long I knew your name, yet only by chance I found you, though I had sworn to

search for you and punish you. I have failed this once, but rest assured I shall not fail a second time. We shall meet again before many months. Guard yourself as you may, I shall find you and avenge the wrongs of my mother. I have sworn it. Until then,

"With unending hatred,
"COUNTESS HILDA VON HOHENLICH."

"Well, Val, dear, you must admit that I have something to look forward to," laughed Joan.

Seated together on Joan's cot, in barracks, the two had just finished reading the menacing letter written by the vengeful countess.

"Funny, isn't it?" she continued. "The day I searched that woman on board the *Netherlands* she told me I'd be sorry. How do you suppose she managed to tell her daughter of me, and how did this Hilda manage to find me?"

"Ask me something easier," Valerie said rather soberly. "The longer I live over here, the more I marvel at the nets these Germans are always trying to weave about our Allies."

"Well, this letter isn't going to worry me," sturdily declared Joan. "I hope I *do* meet her highness again, before many months, too. They say she has kept the Boches well posted about war activities in this section. Next time I meet her, I'll hang on to her. I'll tie her in the am-

bulance so she can't slide out at the back and vanish, as she did that night."

"Oh, you'll probably never hear of her again," was Valerie's opinion. "She was just so peeved she had to tell you about it."

Joan smiled, but said nothing. She had a curious idea that she and the countess spy were destined to meet again. It seemed to her that the curtain had rung down only on the first act of a most thrilling drama, in which she and the countess would enact the leading rôles.

"These last few weeks take me back to our Motor Corps days, Val," she said. "We thought our details then were highly exciting. They were tame compared to all we've gone through this summer."

"I always knew it would be so," nodded Valerie. "Behind the lines may not be the safest place in the world, but it's the only place for me until the war's over and the Huns are back in Berlin for good.

"It's truly *our* place. It took us a long time to get here, but we're here and we're going to stay here, too, until Peace comes and we go sailing home again to tell the folks what it means to be Khaki Girls Behind the Lines."

"We've only just begun to learn the meaning of that, Val," Joan said soberly. "The longer we stay here the nearer we'll come to being veteran drivers in this big war game. It is cer-

tainly a great life and we're never, *never* going to weaken."

In the trying months to come, with America's sturdy sons daily pouring into France to turn the tide against the Hun hordes, the Khaki Girls were destined fully to live up to Joan's ardent declaration. How they valiantly continued to do their bit for democracy will be told in the next volume of this series, to be entitled, "KHAKI GIRLS AT WINDSOR BARRACKS; OR, 'STANDING-TO' WITH THE TRUSTY TWENTY."

THE END

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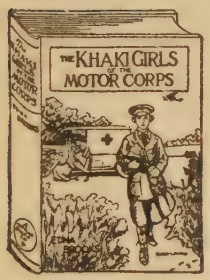

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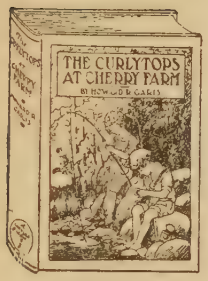

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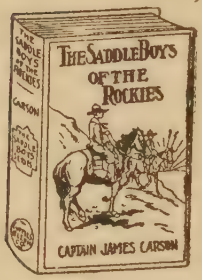

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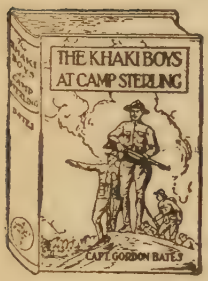

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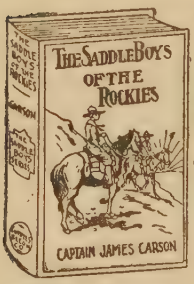

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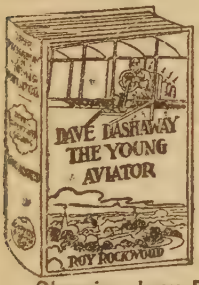

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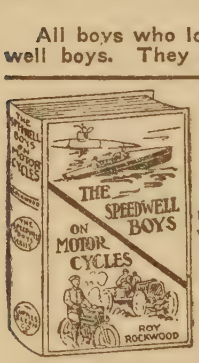

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